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"FIFTY WOULDN'T BUY ONE!" CRIED THE GIRL, CONTEMPTUOUSLY, A GLEAM OF ANGER IN HER DARK EYES.

The Bouquet Girl; or, A Million of Money.

BY A AGILE PENNE,
Author of "Orphan Nell, the Orange Girl," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

FULTON FRANK.

"BUCKETS' ten cents apiece, and I don't sell my kisses!"

Fulton ferry, in the great metropolis of New York, at "nine o' the night in the heart of June." The speaker, a flower-girl, fourteen or fifteen years old, apparently—a pretty little thing, despite her coarse dress, which was very neat though, and the ugly red handkerchief tied over her head—enough to disguise the features of beauty's queen itself; but the face was strangely pretty, cast as it was in a pure oval mold, delicate features, red, pouting lips, reminding one of ripe strawberries wet with dew; a nose, just a little bit turned up at the end, "tip-tilted," to use the poetical expression—*retrousse*, as the French have it—*pug*, to use our plain, homely English, not enough to spoil the prettiness of the girl's face, but rather to add a charming, roguish grace to it; the eyes were

large, full, and as black as the wild cherry, hanging in shining beauty upon the parent tree, afar off in the pleasant country lanes; the complexion was slightly tinged, just as if the steady old sun-god had taken a fancy to the pretty maiden, and had allowed his beams to rest too long upon the fresh young face; but the skin was so thin and transparent that one could plainly see the warm blood circling beneath.

From under the ugly handkerchief that disfigured the head a few crispy curls escaped, black as black could be, and as fine as finest silk.

The sentence quoted came quite pertly from the pouting lips of the girl, and she tossed her little head, canary-bird fashion, in an extremely captivating manner.

At nine o'clock at night the neighborhood of Fulton ferry is not a very populous one. All the stores are closed with the exception of the eating and drinking saloons, the fruit-stands and the cigar shops.

Not very many passengers cross over the ferry about that hour either, when compared to the throng which fill the street in the daytime, but after eight o'clock at night the traffic drops off.

Therefore, with the exception of the flower-girl, a couple of old women, eagerly endeavoring to dispose of the stock of evening newspapers left upon their hands, and the gentleman who stopped to "chaff" the girl, to use the English word, there was hardly a soul in the neighborhood.

The girl, with her flowers, had accosted the gentleman at the edge of the cross-walk.

"Buy some flowers, sir, to put in your button-hole; real nice ones and all fresh, warranted not to wither!" she had exclaimed, in her common stock-in-trade phrases.

And the man, a finely-dressed gentleman, attracted by the pretty face of the girl, had halted to talk with her.

"How much?" he said, "and what will you sell a couple of kisses for?"

The girl's quick reply—she was used to this sort of thing at this hour of the night—we have already given.

"Buckets, eh? You mean bouquets, I suppose?" and the man allowed his bold gray eyes to rest admiringly on the face of the girl. "By Jove! little one, do you know that you are just as pretty as a pink?"

"Oh, yes, I know all about that," replied the girl, in the most matter-of-fact way. "I'm a rose, and a pink, and a daisy, and a pansy, and all sorts of posies, just about this time o' night, particularly to gentlemen who have drank more wine than is good for them."

The random shot struck home; the man had been drinking—drinking pretty freely, too, or he would not have been affected, for he had a head like iron.

"Why, sis, you're about as sharp as a razor!" he said, with a laugh. "I don't want your flowers, but I'll give five dollars for a kiss!"

"Rich, ain't you? But I won't rob you, poor man, because you don't know what you are about!" the girl responded, in a manner that was far from expressing compassion. "The article is not worth the money. Come! buy some flowers! See! there are only two 'buckets' left; you shall have them both for fifteen cents; there's a bargain for you!"

"Oh, bother your flowers; I don't want them; but I'll give you *ten* dollars for a kiss."

"Fifty wouldn't buy one!" cried the girl, contemptuously, a gleam of anger in her dark eyes.

"Do you *give* them away, then?"

"Not for the asking."

There were no witnesses to this little scene. The two newspaper-women were busily engaged holding up the wall of the ferry-house, and bitterly bemoaning their ill-luck at being "stuck" with so many unsalable journals, and there was no one else near at hand.

Great oaks from little acorns grow; trivial circumstances sometimes change the fate of a nation.

In this case if Jack Leipper had not indulged so freely in the "rosy"—the beverage which cheers, and *does* intoxicate—at an uptown hotel that evening, with a party of friends, he would never have stopped to bandy words with a flower-girl in the street. He was not drunk; far from it! Jack Leipper—"Captain Jack," as he was generally called—never got drunk; it was almost a physical impossibility; liquor couldn't do it; but it did excite him and put queer ideas into his head.

And who was Jack Leipper, this handsome fellow, with his costly diamonds, his elegant attire, and a face formed to make women fall in love with him at the first glance.

In person he was a very model of a man, tall, straight, broad-shouldered, well-proportioned, regular features, strongly-defined, a head of superb hair, all glossy black curls, pure white skin, and magnificent side-whiskers, worn long and flowing in the English style, the rest of his face being cleanly shaven.

Only one bad feature about the man, and this few people noticed, no matter how close observers they were. The man's eyes, gray in color, were shifty, restless and uncertain, and at times shone with a greenish hue; but, somehow, there was a glamour about him that hid this prominent feature, or at least softened it down so that it was seldom noticed.

He was stylish, distinguished-looking, and attracted attention wherever he went.

"Who is he?" strangers would ask.

"Why, don't you know?" the "posted" ones would reply, in astonishment; "why that's Leipper, Captain Jack, the chief of the Modocs!"

And why was this dainty gentleman nick-named after the unhappy Indian chief, who, in the wilds of the lava-beds, in his primitive simplicity, attempted to avenge the wrongs he had suffered at the hands of the thieving Indian-agents, by making war upon the United States Government?

In the entrance way to one of the finest buildings on lower Broadway hangs the business card of "Captain Jack."

LEIPPER AND LEIPPER,
Counselors and Attorneys at Law,"

the sign reads, but the second Leipper is a fiction, for only one exists.

Captain Jack's advertisements, constantly before the eye of the public in the columns of the most widely-circulated newspapers, give a better idea of why he was called "the Modoc chief."

LEIPPER AND LEIPPER, DIVORCE LAWYERS—No.—Broadway. Divorces procured without publicity, in any State, and perfectly legal. No fee until papers are delivered. Consultation free."

And this is why he is called Captain Jack, chief of the Modocs. He was a *scalper*! Unlucky the client who trusted himself, and cause, to the tender mercies of Captain Jack.

"Fifty dollars wouldn't buy one, eh?" the lawyer said, reflectively, still gazing with his evil eyes intently upon the pretty face of the flower-girl, and then an idea suddenly flashed into his mind. "How old are you, sis?"

"Seventeen."

"You don't look it."

"I'm guessing it, that's all."

"What's your name?"

"Frank."

"Frank?"

"Yes, Fulton Frank; that's what everybody calls me; but my right name is Francesca."

"By Jove! the very name! Well, this is a piece of luck! Say, Frank, how would you like to come in for about half a million of dollars?"

CHAPTER II.

A FORTUNE THAT WAITS FOR AN HEIR.

"A *HALF* a million of dollars!" cried the girl, in astonishment. "Oh! you must have been drinking a great deal of wine!"

"Oh, no, my pretty little flower-girl; I know exactly what I am about, and, if you'll only say the word, I'll make your fortune for you!"

The girl drew back, distrustfully.

"Oh, don't be afraid, my pink; I mean business; here's my card," and he drew an elaborately got up business-card from his pocket and presented it to her. "I'm a lawyer, you see. Meeting you here tonight is one of those lucky accidents that happen sometimes, for I shouldn't be surprised if you turn out to be the very person I want. Answer a few questions, sis, and answer them truthfully."

The girl drew her little, lithe figure up disdainfully.

"I don't tell lies!" she replied pertly.

"No, of course not; none of us do in this world until we are found out," the lawyer said, with a sneering laugh. It was plain that he had little faith in human nature. "But this is rather an awkward place to talk and we're right in people's way; come up here by the gate. I'll buy all the flowers you've got, so you'll lose nothing by the operation."

Captain Jack proceeded to the ferry-house and leaning lazily against the side of the structure, just a few paces from the gate, took out a thick memorandum-book and pencil in hand, prepared for action.

The girl had followed him, a dubious look upon her pretty face. It was plain that she distrusted the good faith of the man.

"Now to commence right; your full name?" he said.

"Francesca Blakey."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen—I believe."

"You are not sure?"

"No, sir."

"Are your parents living?"

"I don't know, sir."

"No?"

"No, sir; I don't know anything about them."

"Well, that's lucky!"

The girl looked astonished.

"I mean for the purpose I have in view. Now have you got any relatives?"

"No, sir."

"None at all—be sure?"

"No, sir; not one in the world."

"Do you know where you were born?"

The girl hesitated and looked at the lawyer with a glance full of distrust.

"What's the matter, sis?" Leipper understood the meaning of the look in an instant. "What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know whether it will do me any good to tell you or not. Maybe you are—" and she stopped abruptly.

"Well, maybe I am what?" he questioned. "There is somebody that you are afraid of eh?"

"Yes," the girl admitted.

"And you hesitate to reply to my questions because you think that I may be connected with him?"

The girl nodded.

"Well, I am not, I assure you. I am acting entirely on my own account. I am in search of a certain party, not to injure them, but to make them a present of about a *half* a million of dollars. I can't find the party, and I don't believe that I will ever be able to find her. Meeting you to-night something put it into my head that you would be able to fill the bill.

The champagne likely had a good deal to do with it, but that's neither here nor there. If you are willing to trust me—to do as I say—perhaps I can give you a fortune. Of course I shall take a good slice out of it for my trouble; you can easily afford to pay it; but before I can begin I must be put in possession of everything that you know about yourself. If you are an orphan, without father or mother, or any relatives, why you are just the girl I'm looking for. But if there are two or three people in the world who know all about you, who you are, where you were born, the names of your parents, that upsets the whole thing.

The girl shook her head.

"There is not a soul in the world that knows anything at all about me."

"Good!"

"I was born at Long Branch, New Jersey, in 1859.

Captain Jack uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"By Jove! that's coming pretty close to it! The girl I want was born in Long Branch, New Jersey, in 1858."

"Well, I am not sure that I wasn't born in '58," the girl added. "It was either '58 or '59. I said '59 because when I tell any one that I am nineteen they always say that I must be mistaken, for I do not look as old as that."

"Looks are deceptive; '58 is the best date for you to stick to. What about your early life?"

"I was brought up by a man named Limowell, Lysander Limowell."

"Well, but why did he take care of you? How did it happen that you were with him?"

"I was left at his door one night in a basket, and his wife took pity on me and adopted me. He always called himself my uncle, and not until my sixteenth birthday did he tell me the true story of my childhood."

"You are sure that he told you true? Perhaps you may be his daughter?"

"Oh, no!" and a quick, vivid blush swept over the pretty face of the flower-girl. "He wanted to marry me, and that is the reason I ran away."

"And your name—the name he called you I suppose—Francesca, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, well! this is an astonishing coincidence!" the lawyer exclaimed. "Just listen to my memorandum."

And he read aloud from a page of the book: "Lorenzo Vendotena, retired confectioner, residence 910 Vestry street; died January 18th, 1877, leaving a fortune, estimated to be worth about a

half a million, which by will he bequeathed to his grandchild, Francesca, daughter of his son Antonio, and in the event of the said Francesca being dead the estate to go to her heir or heirs." So much for the will, now for the heir." And again he read from a page in the book: "Antonio, a wild and reckless young man, in the year 1857 visited Long Branch, became acquainted with and, under a false name married one Decetra Blakey. The girl's relatives, however, knew who Antonio was, and it is tolerably plain that the unscrupulous young man in endeavoring to insinuate the girl became entrapped himself; and that the marriage was arranged with a design upon the wealth of the father. When the news comes to the old man's ears he swears that not one penny of his money shall ever enrich the wife who entrapped his son into the marriage. He drives his son away and refuses to see the wife; finally in his rage bribes his son to fly to Europe and desert wife and child, which, in the interim, is born—female child named Francesca. Son goes to Europe and is never seen or heard of again. The wife dies about a year afterward, and child disappears and cannot be found."

There's the case exactly as it stands at present. I have been to Long Branch and devoted considerable time to hunting up this Francesca—have advertised in the newspapers and all without avail. I have a picture of the wife, an excellent portrait, done in oil, and the child was said to look like her. Your face resembles that portrait; that resemblance put an idea into my head. Why shouldn't you be *this* Francesca?"

"Perhaps I am," the girl replied, a peculiar expression upon her pretty face.

"Well, that would be a joke, wouldn't it?" he exclaimed. "To stumble on the heiress just by accident and all because I happened to drink a few more glasses of champagne than I ought to have done. Just keep it up, my pretty pink! that's the idea, exactly; you are the heiress to this half a million, and if there are any doubtful points in regard to your identity that need clearing up so as to make a strong case I will provide a half a dozen excellent witnesses who will swear with stolid fidelity to whatever I tell them. It's a bargain, then, is it?"

"Yes, if you choose to regard me as really the heir."

"Oh, I'll risk it, if you'll only stick to your story and post yourself up in a few details which I will give you. Where do you live?"

"No.—Baxter street, near Grand, top floor."

The lawyer made a memorandum of the address.

"At eight, to-morrow night, expect me."

And so the compact was made and the poor bouquet-girl entered as a contestant for the stakes valued at half a million!

CHAPTER III.

DEATH INTERFERES.

Of all the evil-smelling localities that the great city of New York can boast, that region just southeast of Center Market, running through from Grand street to Chatham, is perhaps the worst. This includes the once-notorious Five Points, but the cutting through of Worth street, and sundry other improvements of a like nature, have greatly bettered the locality of late years.

But for wretched human misery, squalid suffering, and general debasement, the section bounded by Grand street and Chatham, Center street and the Bowery, can surely produce examples not to be matched in any other city on this side of the ocean.

See this gloomy-looking "barracks," six stories high, within a stone's throw of Center Market! What a prison-like aspect it presents! It is a tenement-house, occupied only by the poorest of families; not crowded to overflowing, either, as the majority of tenement-houses are in the great metropolis, where humans live like bees; it is very sparsely occupied.

It is an old house, badly modeled, and tenants pass it by, preferring the more modern tenements; and then, too, there is something gloomy and disconsolate about the dingy brick building; it has more the air of a prison than a dwelling-house.

Although affording accommodation for some twenty families, yet it was rare that more than three or four tenants were to be found within the dwelling, and these three or four invariably the poorest of the poor.

It was on the night succeeding the one whereon the great divorce lawyer, Captain Jack, had made the bouquet-girl, Fulton Frank, such a brilliant proposal, that we invite the reader to accompany us while we look in upon one of those scenes of misery only to be found in a large city.

On the very top floor of the tenement-house, in a little front room, about ten feet square, the single window of which looked out upon the dark and dingy roofs of the neighboring houses, lay a fragile girl, dying of starvation.

No fiction, gentle reader! In the great metropolis of this, our glorious New World, where we burn our corn for fuel and leave our fish to rot upon the beach, because it does not "pay" to send the articles to market—the middleman's commission eating up all the profit—human creatures actually perish for want of food enough to keep body and soul together.

We cannot describe the furniture of the room, because there was no furniture in it.

Upon the floor was a coarse pallet, a straw mattress in the last stages of dilapidation, covered with a single gray blanket. A few old boxes scattered about the room served for tables and chairs. There were also two or three plates, an old saucer, a tin cup and basin, a candlestick, and that was all.

A young and beautiful girl, too, the sufferer, although worn almost to skin and bones by her terrible struggle with the gaunt wolf, Hunger.

Dark hair and eyes, oval face, now white as the face of the dead, a superb form, though sadly wasted away—one might travel far and not meet with a maiden more pleasant to look upon.

A careful examination of the sufferer, and a close observer would have very little doubt that she was not long for this world.

There was no light in the room, the full rays of the moon shining in through the window affording sufficient illumination.

There was a low knock at the door.

The invalid feebly bade the applicant enter.

And then there came into the apartment a young girl who so strongly resembled the sufferer that even a stranger would have been certain to believe that the two were of the same blood.

And yet her hair was red-gold in hue, curling in little crispy ringlets all over her shapely head; her eyes, though, were dark; her complexion was not so pearly white as the other's, yet still there was a great resemblance between the two.

An exclamation, surprise and horror blended, came from the lips of the girl as she stood in the doorway and gazed upon the invalid by the clear light of the moon.

Nor was the other less surprised.

"Oh, sister!" cried the new-comer, hurrying to the side of the sufferer, "do I find you at last, and in such a state?"

"You have come," the invalid murmured. "Oh! how I have been praying that you might come, and yet I have striven to hide myself away from you."

"And why did you so, Francesca? Have I not always been a true sister to you? Could I be nearer if the same blood beat within our veins?"

"No, dear one; no!" and the invalid gently caressed the cheek of the other with her thin white hands. "I have been cruelly—terribly deceived. I am dying, little sister, and I am thankful for it. I am sick of this world, and I long for the rest and peace of the quiet grave."

"But why did you leave home so mysteriously? We all believed that you were dead—that is, father said that we all ought to believe so, but I did not. I knew how you wished to get to the city about which you had heard so much, and I made up my mind that you were here somewhere, and for two months now I have been here in New York in search of you. I got a basket of laces and little trimmings, and I have supported myself by peddling from house to house. I thought that in time I might be able to find you, yet after all my trouble, it was just a mere accident that led me here to-night."

"Father believed me to be dead?" the sufferer said, evidently astonished.

"Well, that is what he said we all ought to believe."

"Yet I left a letter telling him why I went away."

"And he got it, too!" the girl exclaimed, impulsively. "I felt sure all the time that he did know something about you, although he said that he didn't. But why did you leave home?"

"I ran away to get married."

"To get married?"

"Yes; I made the acquaintance of a gentleman at one of the Saturday-night hops at the Ocean House; like the weak, foolish girl that I was, I used to steal out of the house and go down to the beach nearly every pleasant night. You know how terribly romantic I was; I was always dreaming that some prince in disguise would come along and marry me some time. Miserable creature that I am, I have paid dearly for my wicked folly. Everybody said that I was such a pretty girl. Ah! sister dear, my pretty face has been my ruin! But I never had a mother's careful eye to watch my wayward actions; if Heaven had not taken my mother from me, I should not be lying here, dying by inches—a poor, miserable, sinful creature—this night."

"Oh, don't talk so! You make me cry, too!"

For a few minutes only the loud breathing and the half-suppressed sobs of the weeping girl could be heard.

The invalid was the first to recover her composure.

"I must hasten on with my story, for I feel that I am growing weaker and weaker every minute; life is slowly slipping from my grasp. I was so vain of my beauty, so weary of the dull life of poverty that I was leading, so eager for my prince to come, that I allowed almost any fine-looking gentleman to make my acquaintance, provided he took the trouble to run after me. And in such a way I made the acquaintance of this man who has dragged me down to the grave. He was a very fine-looking gentleman, had plenty of money, and said that he was the son of an English earl. I met him very often; he professed great admiration for me, and within one month from the day I first made his acquaintance we were married. I deceived him, too, for I did not tell him who I was. I was so crazy to get him, and

I thought that if he saw father he would never want to marry me; so I told him that I was an orphan without any relatives. After we were married, he took me to New York. I left a note for father, telling him that I had been married, and that as soon as I reached England I would write to him. Alas! that day never came! My husband had deceived me; he was an American; not only that, but, after six months of wedlock, he cast me off, coolly telling me that he was tired of me and wanted a girl with money. That was one month ago. I sought refuge here, and have parted with everything I possessed so that I could procure food, for I could get no work. I believe that I have been mad at times, for I have dreamed of mother, and in the dream she said I must not die, for grandfather had left me all his fortune; but I am going fast—fast."

The girl wearily closed her eyes.

"The name of the base villain!" cried the other, her eyes flashing, and her little hands firmly clenched together. "I will revenge you!"

"I will not tell you. I forgive him!" And with the words the soul of the sufferer glided away from this cold world.

She was dead!

CHAPTER IV.

AN OBSTACLE IN THE WAY.

PUNCTUALLY at eight o'clock on the evening appointed the "Chief of the Modocs" turned from Grand street into Baxter, and some thirty steps brought him to the house which bore the number which the bouquet-girl had given to him.

With his shrewd and searching eyes the lawyer took a survey of the premises.

"A dingy old barracks," he muttered; "there will be quite a change in the fortunes of this pert young miss if I succeed in getting her the half a million. By Jove! from the way the thing looks I begin to believe that she is the right heir, after all. Now, if I do get her the estate, and she is as grateful as she ought to be, I know a way in which she can show her gratitude and in a very becoming manner. But, that is a matter to be attended to hereafter; she is a sly little puss and I must be careful not to alarm her. Let me see! she said on the top floor, I believe," and as the lawyer spoke he took a glance upward. The moonlight came full and strong against the front of the building so that it was as plainly visible as by day. "Something of a climb," he mused, and then he entered the house.

The front door being unfastened afforded an easy access; it is very rarely locked in a tenement-house; but if the street was light the entry was dark enough, there being no illuminating agent at all provided.

Being tolerably familiar, though, with the general construction of this style of house, the lawyer soon groped his way to the foot of the stairs and began the ascent.

To climb to the top of one of these tenement barracks is no easy task, but many poor tenants are obliged, by iron fortune, to do so daily—the upper floors renting much cheaper than the lower ones, and these good people console themselves for the labor of climbing heavenward by boasting of how much purer the air is up in the sky region.

In due time the lawyer reached the top floor and knocked at the first door he came to.

He heard the scuffling of a heavy pair of feet, not at all like the tread of the bouquet-girl; then the door opened and a huge, red-faced, middle-aged Irish woman appeared.

"Does a young lady who sells flowers at Fulton ferry live here?" the lawyer asked.

"Sorra a taste of lie in that!" the old woman replied, promptly. "Will ye be afther walkin' in, sor? I take it that ye are the gentleman that she expected."

"Yes, I am the party."

"Sit down, sor. It's proud I am to see ye!" And the old woman brought forward a chair, taking particular care to dust it off carefully with her apron before offering it to the visitor.

The lawyer, always on the alert, looked carefully around the room. It was evidently the parlor that he had entered, for it was quite neatly furnished and everything was as clean as a new pin.

Some of the articles in the room, though, rather surprised the visitor. For instance: upon a table in the corner of the room sat a massive Roman helmet with its overhanging comb lined with scarlet plumes. By the side of the helmet was a tremendous two-handed cross-hilt sword, such a weapon as Richard of the Lion Heart might have wielded in the days of the Crusades; then in another corner of the apartment were a pair of boots made out of russet-colored leather with wide flaring tops—such foot-gear as the cavaliers in the days of Charles the Second of Merrie England might have worn. A very monkly pair of sandals kept the boots company.

Noticing that these strange articles had attracted the lawyer's attention the old woman vouchsafed an explanation.

"Them belongs to me boarder, sor. It's a play-actor he is in the theayter, d'ye mind?"

"An actor, eh?"

"Yes, sor; an' a foine wan he is, too, barrin' that he doesn't get the chance that he do ought be havin'. His name is Mister Craige; mebbe ye are knowin' to him."

"No, I think not."

"Oh, he's a foine broth of a boy."

"But, where is the young lady?" asked Leipper, after having carefully looked around without being able to perceive any trace of her.

"She's s'out, sor, but she'll be back immadately. She axed me to tell you to wait for a bit if ye kem in before she did."

And then, Captain Jack's eyes fell upon a very well executed portrait of the flower-girl done in oil

and adorning the mantle-piece. Such a piece of work in such a humble home surprised him.

"That's a good picture," he declared.

"Yis, sor; Mister Craige did that. Oh! it's a janus, he is!"

"A genius, eh?"

"Ye may well say that and not break your shins over a lie!"

"Paints as well as acts?"

"Yis, sor, an' he writes, too, sor; illigant poetry! Oh! it would make your mouth water to listen to it!"

"He's quite a favorite, I presume, with the young lady?"

"Oh, you may well say that!" and the old woman nodded, mysteriously. "Shure! she can't help it! It's an illigant gentleman he is, an' it's lashin's of gould he'll make wan of these days."

"And what does he think of the young lady?" "The lawyer didn't particularly like the appearance of the young actor upon the scene; he was afraid that some of his little schemes might be interfered with.

"Shure! phat should he think but phat everybody else thinks, that she is as illigant a gurl as ever walked on tin toes!"

"Then, I suppose they will be making a match of it, one of these days, eh?"

"Yis, sor; not the l'aste taste of a doubt about that, an' a foine couple they will make, too. Why, sor, I'll go bail that ye might look from here to China, or any of them haythen parts, an' not find a purtier couple."

Now this information was anything but agreeable to the chief of the Modocs, for, in fact, Captain Jack had made up his mind that it would be a good speculation for him to marry the heiress and thus be enabled to help her take care of that half-million of dollars which was laying around loose, as it were, waiting for a claimant.

Leipper was a shrewd fellow, who fancied that he could see as far into a mill-stone as the next man. In some manner—how he could not very well explain—he had made up his mind that the flower-girl was the granddaughter of the old Italian, and he felt very little doubt in regard to getting the money. Two executors had been intrusted with the carrying out of the will, and one of the two was decidedly under the lawyer's thumb.

Leipper remained until about nine o'clock and then, the girl not having returned, and another appointment pressing upon him, he took his departure, having got all the information out of the old woman in regard to the young actor that he could.

Leaving word for the young girl that he would call on the next evening, at the same hour, he quit the room.

The old woman held the light for him to descend the first flight and then left him to darkness and his own devices.

Reflecting upon this obstacle in the way in the person of the young actor, the lawyer did not take any particular care to count the flights of stairs as he descended; the natural consequence was, that, when he came to the lower entry he did not know it, but instead of proceeding straight to the front door, turned round and started for the rear entrance, feeling all the way along for the other staircase which he thought he had still to descend.

The result of this movement was that he fetched up at the back door with considerable violence, not being prepared for it; then he turned to retrace his steps.

And as he faced around a wonderful tableau was presented to his astonished vision.

The front door flew open suddenly, and there, on the stoop, stood the very image of the woman whose picture he possessed, but who had long ago rested in the quiet tomb, the wife of old Vendotena's son, Decetra, the dead and gone!

CHAPTER V.

BAFFLED.

THE shrewd and unscrupulous lawyer stood for a moment like a man under the influence of some magic spell.

This was no trick of the imagination.

There in the doorway, turning half-around and looking back into the street, so that the moonbeams shone clearly on her features, was the woman who some fifteen years before had gone down into the silent tomb.

Captain Jack was a great admirer of female beauty and the portrait of the young wife of the old man's son had made quite an impression upon him.

And now, lo and behold! here was the same face, the same dark eyes and the red-gold locks, so rare a combination and so seldom seen together.

"Am I dreaming or is this a ghost from the other world?" he muttered, in amazement.

The figure advanced into the entry; the door closed and again darkness reigned supreme.

The lawyer could hear the rustle of a woman's skirts—the figure was attired in light garments—and it was quite plain that if the face was spiritual, the dress had nothing unearthly about it.

Captain Jack determined to solve the mystery at once, and so he sprung forward in the darkness.

"Hallo, miss—madam! I wish to speak to you!" he cried.

No answer, but from the rustle of the dress he concluded that the figure was fleeing from him, as fast as possible.

Of course in the darkness the lawyer missed the stairs, and so lost some valuable seconds of time, and when he reached the first landing and stopped to listen, not a sound did he hear to break the still-

ness that so commonly reigned within the old prison-like barracks.

Leipper was of a persevering nature, and as he had come to the conclusion that the figure was decidedly more human than spiritual, he determined to ferret out the mystery. So, he proceeded straight upstairs to the apartments occupied by the old woman.

In answer to his knock Mrs. O'Hallahan—as the lady was called—opened the door.

"Excuse my disturbing you, but a lady just passed me in the entry—a lady with golden-red hair and dark eyes," he said.

"Sorra a wan of me knows," the dame replied.

"Does any other family reside on this floor besides yourself?"

"There's a wee little woman has a front room be-yant, but it's not her ye want, I'll go bail! for her hair is black and she's been so sick for the last two or three days that she hasn't been out of her room."

This satisfied the lawyer so he did not attempt to pursue his investigations further.

And thus it often is in this life; wandering in the forest, seeking the path which will carry us out of the maze, as our feet stray into it, we resolutely turn away, thinking it but a blind trail, and so prolong our suspense.

Had the wily lawyer pursued his investigations into the room of the sick girl, it would have led to explanations that must have shortened the story we have to tell. But, as fate willed it, Leipper was satisfied with the information, and after inquiring how many other families there were in the house, again bid Mrs. O'Hallahan good-night.

And then to each one of the other tenants the lawyer went, described the woman he sought, and inquired if any of them knew aught of her.

Not the slightest bit of information did he gain, and at last, baffled and annoyed, he gave up the search.

"It cannot be that my eyes are playing tricks upon me!" he muttered, as he stood in the street and gazed wistfully up at the old barracks. "I'll swear I saw the woman! the exact image of that picture which they say is an excellent portrait of the mother of this girl I seek. The flower-girl bears a strong likeness to it, but nothing like this one tonight. Unless my eyes have deceived me, I've seen Francesca Vendotena, but where on earth did she go to, and why did she run away when I called her? This is the most mysterious case I ever had anything to do with."

And having arrived at this conclusion the lawyer sauntered slowly away, every now and then casting back a glance at the old brick house standing so cold and grim in the moonlight.

The old pile had just the aspect of a building wherein a dreadful secret might be hid.

That the reader may have a clearer idea of the causes which led to the perplexing predicament in which the half-million of dollars left by Lorenzo Vendotena is placed, waiting anxiously for the heir to come, than the brief statement of the lawyer affords, we will briefly tell the story of the past.

As a man of thirty, with a boy of five, (his son, Antonio,) Lorenzo Vendotena had come to this country. The father had been concerned in one of those revolutionary plots so common in Italy in the days when the Bambas ruled over southern Italy, and had been forced to fly for his life.

A confectioner by profession he had worked at his trade until he attained a good knowledge of English, and then had started on his own account, and being not only an excellent artiste in his line, but also a saving, prudent man, prospered exceedingly—so much so that, in twenty years he was accounted quite wealthy.

As we have said, the old man was saving and prudent, honest as the day, a man whose word was as good as his bond, but something of a miser withal. A hot-tempered, peppery old gentleman, fond of having his own way and impatient of contradiction. Antonio, the son, was in all respects almost exactly the opposite of his father. It was a passion with the old man to accumulate money; it was a passion with Antonio to spend it. The father was quick-tempered, brave as a lion, but generally as ready to forgive a foe as to quarrel with him; the son, on the contrary, was not quick to anger, and he was a very coward at heart, but when he did become offended, he never forgot nor forgave; he was trickery personified, and seemed only to take delight in some mean, petty action, not an open, noble revenge. His father's money the son squandered with a lavish hand.

The old man remonstrated and threatened many times to turn him adrift if he did not mend his ways, but Antonio had heard the threat so often that it did not trouble him in the least.

The year that Antonio reached his twenty-fifth birthday some chance took him to Long Branch. At that time of course it was nothing like what it is to-day; still it was a place of considerable resort in the summer time for those living near at hand. And all the old sailors, cruising up along the shore from Barnegat, always kept a good look-out for the "tavern houses," as they termed Long Branch.

At the sea-shore the son made the acquaintance of a young and pretty girl. She was poor, the niece of a lawyer, and Antonio knew well enough that his father would never hear of his marrying the girl, for the old confectioner had high views for his son in that respect, but as Antonio was infatuated with the maid, he determined to win her by foul means since he could not by fair. He had been careful to disguise his identity under a false name. His idea was to marry the girl and then desert her, when he should tire of her. He flattered himself that he would never be traced.

But the lawyer, the uncle of the girl, and with

whom she lived, suspected that the young man, who spent his money so freely, was other than he pretended, and took measures to discover who and what he was. Of course, when he quietly found out that he was the son of the rich confectioner, he was delighted at the way things were going. He therefore allowed Antonio to believe he was playing a deep game.

In time the young rascal proposed to the girl, was accepted, and the wedding took place, but the lawyer uncle took care to have plenty of witnesses present, and the moment the ceremony was over, announced who the bridegroom really was, and had the proper name inserted in the certificate.

The biter was bit.

CHAPTER VI.

THE STORY OF THE PAST.

ANTONIO accepted the situation with as good a grace as possible. In his weak, foolish way he loved the pretty country girl, and, although he had deliberately plotted to wrong her, when he found that the Jersey lawyer had proved too smart for him he swallowed the pill with ease and grace.

So far Lysander Limowell, Esquire, as he was fond of being termed, had succeeded. The son of the rich New Yorker was the husband of his niece. Antonio's concealment of his name he affected to look upon as a mere boyish freak, something to be laughed at, not to merit condemnation.

In the mind of the wily lawyer was the fortune of the old confectioner. Antonio was an only son, and by the marriage of his niece to the young New Yorker he had secured to the girl great wealth.

After a time the lawyer hinted to Antonio the necessity of revealing the marriage to his father. Antonio turned pale, became confused, and attempted to palter with the matter.

Weak, irresolute, not strong enough to do right, but feeble enough to do ill, the unworthy son of an honest father had allowed his passions to get the better of his judgment. But now, when called upon to bear the consequences of his act, he shrank from the task. He knew the high aims of his father; the old Italian, filled with a fervent admiration for the people of the land where he had acquired his fortune, had hoped, by the aid of the money, to marry his son to some brilliant society girl. Poor and unlettered himself, he had spent his wealth freely to educate his boy, but the old saying regarding the impossibility of making a silk purse out of a pig's ear was fully realized in this case. Antonio was a vagabond by nature—a true Italian lazzaroni; indolent, tricky. All the education and polish in the world couldn't make the old confectioner's son either a gentleman or an honest man.

Antonio, brought to bay at last, told the lawyer that he felt sure that the old man would never forgive him for marrying without his consent, and urged that the matter be kept secret; but the grasping lawyer thought differently. He expected that the father would be terribly angry at first, but then his niece, Decestra, was a pretty girl, came of a good family, and though she was an orphan, and poor, yet, apart from the fact of her poverty, the richest and proudest man in the world could find no occasion to object to her.

Determining to bring matters to a climax, Limowell journeyed to New York, called upon the retired confectioner, and broke the news of the marriage to him.

Old Vendotena grew fairly purple with rage as he listened to the lawyer's story.

Limowell had bountifully embellished the narrative with a glowing description of the strength and beauty of the love which existed between the two—had descended largely upon the beauty of his niece, the excellence of her education, and how fitted she was to adorn even the palace of a peer.

He might as well have spared his breath and pains, however, for the old confectioner's mind only grasped one thing—Antonio was married to a poor, obscure girl.

The quick-witted parent understood the whole affair at a glance. His son had been entrapped into the union because he was the heir to a large fortune.

Briefly but firmly the old man spoke his mind.

"Your niece has married my son for his money—"

The lawyer would fain have controverted this statement, but the old Italian imposed silence by a wave of his hand.

"Not one penny of my fortune shall ever come into her hands. My wealth is mine, and I shall dispose of it as I please; and sooner than allow this paltry trick to succeed I will throw it all into the sea!"

Limowell attempted to reason with the enraged man, but the effort was useless. Old Vendotena ordered the lawyer to leave the house, and summoned the servants to eject him.

The intriguer retreated, baffled but not discouraged. The storm was an angry one, but storms do not last forever. Time, he thought, would soften the old man's rage; so Limowell returned to his country home to wait and watch.

The lawyer's income was not large, yet he graciously offered the young couple a home with him until the time should come when the angry confectioner would relent. Limowell had his eyes fixed on the fortune of half a million of dollars which report said appertained to the retired dealer in sweets.

Antonio, however, knew his sire too well to expect that he would ever change, but he kept the knowledge to himself and said nothing.

Time passed on. In May, 1858, a daughter was born to the young couple, whom the crafty lawyer caused to be named Francesca, after Antonio's mother.

And when the child was about six months old, Limowell suggested that perhaps a personal appeal of Antonio, accompanied by his wife and child, might soften the heart of the old man.

Antonio, heartily sick of his bargain, for he missed the luxuries to which he had been accustomed, eagerly caught at the idea. Therefore, with his wife and child, he started for New York.

Presenting himself at the door of his father's house, he was refused admission; the old man had expected this mode of attack, and had provided against it; but the son, not to be baffled, deposited his wife and child in a cheap furnished apartment, and began a regular siege of his father's residence.

It was not long before he met his aged sire face to face.

In the meantime the old confectioner had thought much in regard to the matter. He had shrewdly guessed that Limowell had been at the bottom of the affair, and that he had used his niece as a tool, and in his blind anger the Italian had determined to be revenged upon both of them.

Therefore, he entered into conversation with his son, and soon perceived that Antonio, utterly unprincipled, was willing to do anything, provided he was paid well enough for it.

The father and son soon struck a bargain. For a large sum, cash in hand paid, and an allowance of so much per year, to be paid quarterly, Antonio agreed to desert his wife and child, fly to Europe and stay there.

Not the least bit of a conscience did this rogue have.

The compact was carried out at once.

Antonio never returned to the humble apartment where he had placed his little family.

The anxious wife waited until the next day in sleepless anxiety, then, unable longer to bear the suspense, she took her babe in her arms and sought the residence of the old confectioner.

This time the door opened readily to receive her.

In the old man's presence she told her story, and inquired for her husband.

Not a trace of pity could she see in the old Italian's dark face, as he briefly made reply:

"Your husband, my son, is an utter rascal!" he said, bitterly. "He deceived me, and now has deserted you. I gave him money yesterday. He has probably taken advantage of the money to run away. I do not think that you will ever see him again. You had better forget him. You have caused me a great deal of trouble, but I do not wish to see you suffer. If you will agree to never come near me again, or trouble me in any way, I will give you a thousand dollars."

The young wife agreed, but she intended to use the money to find her husband, for she imagined that the old man was keeping Antonio from her.

She sent her child home so that she might devote herself to the search. She wrote to her uncle occasionally, but at last three or four months passed without a word from her.

Limowell went to New York, and after much difficulty discovered that she had been taken ill, died suddenly, and had been buried in a pauper's grave.

But the child was safe, and the lawyer carefully reared her, his eyes were still intent on the fortune of a half a million.

CHAPTER VII.

THE QUEEN OF THE BLONDES.

In one of the palatial parlors of New York's grandest hotel, the Fifth Avenue, sat a young and pretty girl.

She was sumptuously robed in a carriage-dress that a princess might have envied, and the jewels that she wore were rich and rare enough to excite the admiration of an Indian rajah.

In person she was about the medium height; in figure perfection itself. No old-time master, great in silent marble, ever chiseled a womanly form more exquisitely modeled. Her face, with its large blue eyes—dark blue, and full of fire and passion—its long, straight nose, splendid lips, red as the flower of the cactus, and yet melting with the dewy tenderness all their own—for surely no other daughter of Eve ever possessed such a pair—matched well with the perfectly proportioned figure; but the great charm of the girl was her hair, which was as yellow as beaten gold, fine as silk, and shimmered in the sun as the ripples of the silver moonlight trembled along the surface of the ever-moving wave.

Splendid! glorious! superb!

Such were the exclamations which greeted this perfect creature whenever she took her walks abroad, or rather, whenever she displayed her charms from some handsome vehicle, for it was very seldom indeed that Miss Avise Winne ever condescended thus to use the fairy-like feet, with which Dame Nature had endowed her.

Avise Winne!

A strange name!—a strange girl, so wondrously beautiful!

And who was she?

One had not far to go to find out. Not a bootblack nor a newspaper gamin in the street but could have answered the question in a breath.

No need even to put a question; only to use one's eyes, and information in regard to the beautiful girl stared from every corner, in letters big and little, red and blue and black and parti-colored. Her picture, four times the size of life, and, to use the old saying, twice as natural, ornamented every dead wall; a smaller size was in every window.

AVISE WINNE,

THE QUEEN OF THE BLONDES.

Turn where one would this met the eye. The reader has probably guessed the mystery. This superb creature, so perfect in all outward

seeming, was an actress—a blonde burlesquer, to use the slang of the theater-going world.

In the olden time such a glorious maiden would have been snapped up by the first prince who happened to see her, and, like another Helen, kings might have fought for her, and her smile sufficed to ruin a country.

But, oh! how prosaic and commonplace this age of ours!

No kings jostled elbows, and contended for the smiles of this fair woman; no, she exhibited herself at fifty cents a head nightly, kicked up her elegant heels, and sung as best she knew how, and all for the amusement of the common herd.

It paid, though!

Since Avise Winne and her troupe of burlesque artists had commenced their engagement at Wallack's Theater—ever the leading play-house of America—Avise's share of the profits had exceeded a thousand dollars a week.

And yet Avise—no one ever thought of calling her miss—was not a good actress. The sapient critics declared that she didn't know what acting meant. She merely was a superbly beautiful girl, with a bright, pleasant and rather bold way with her; sung fairly; danced a little; had a sweet voice; was lady-like in spite of her "dash;" displayed an elegant figure freely, and yet was not at all immodest; in fine, pleased the multitude and reaped a rich reward in spite of the hard times, and the general scarcity of money.

One single remark more and we are through with our description of this brilliant girl, who had taken New York by storm, and had made such a "hit" that old artists, veterans of the "boards" and "footlights," rubbed their eyes and wondered what the deuce had got into the public that they should go crazy after this dashy English girl.

The breath of scandal, which seldom spares the woman who boldly dares a public life, had never yet smirched the good name of Avise Winne.

She was the "queen of the blondes," so advertised by her crafty managers, depended upon her handsome face, pretty figure and scanty attire to please the public; but off the stage she kept herself rigidly select, although run after by young men with more money than brains, in a manner that was perfectly absurd.

Avise Winne had been on the stage since childhood, and understood the world, its trials and temptations as well as an ordinary woman of sixty.

Bouquets she accepted, valuable presents, too—as a true daughter of Bohemia—as the artist-tribe is called—she felt that it was her duty to "spoil the Egyptians;" but neither flowers nor presents were passports to her favor.

"Diamond rings are well enough," Avise would say, "but the only ring that can win me, a parson must put on!"

And then, too, there were soft-headed youths of good family, fellows with money, if no brains, who came with honest intent, who dreamed that they could take this footlight flower from the garish glare of the stage's light and transplant her to the quiet of a home, and that there she would bloom and enchant as of yore.

Vain, empty dream, as many a poor fellow who has tried the experiment has discovered to his cost!

But one and all Avise kept at a distance.

"Love! I don't know the meaning of the word, and never expect to!" she was wont to cry in contempt.

Hollow boast, full of fiction, or else her passionate eyes deceived the sight!

The player-folks have keen eyes, that watch one another closely, and Avise had not been two weeks in the theater when the report went round that there was a certain gentleman who had found favor in the beautiful eyes of the imperious young girl.

Not a prominent actor, either, but one who held the position of "walking gentleman" as it is called, the "lover" of the drama, but secondary to the hero.

His name was Ronald Craige, and he played in the farce which preceded the burlesque.

And now to relate the strangest part of all, Craige did not seem to be conscious that he was a favorite of the beautiful blonde queen, and went about his duties with almost stolid indifference in regard to her.

Avise was not a girl to be turned from her purpose; and feeling sure that there was some reason for this indifference in the background, she set her agent, a shrewd, cunning little Englishman, at work to find out all he could about the young man.

Timoleon Hodkinson the agent was named (very seldom called anything but Tim, though, by anybody). He was a little, undersized man, built exactly right for a jockey, with a sharp, weasel-like face, little eyes, scanty mutton-chop whiskers, of a sandy hue, hair of like color, always cropped tight to his head, and altogether an unmistakable English look.

Tim had just entered the apartment.

"It's all right, Avise!" he exclaimed. "Blessed if I didn't know I could do it! Craige has got another gal."

"Another girl!" and Avise's great eyes flashed, while her little hands clenched in anger.

"Shoot me if he hasn't, and she's a nice sort of a piece, too—a bouquet-girl that sells flowers, you know, at Fulton ferry. Craige is as poor as a church-mouse, and he lives in a miserable 'ouse with this gal, and he's painted her portrait, and he's educating her, you know; coming the grand gentleman!"

"And do you think that I can't separate him from this girl?" Avise cried. "Wait and see!"

The door of the apartment opened suddenly, and a tall, thin stranger, shabbily clad, walked, with a mysterious air, into the room.

"I beg your pardon, mademoiselle," he said,

"but I've come to speak to you about a little matter of half a million of dollars."

CHAPTER VIII.

A MYSTERIOUS GENTLEMAN.

A HALF a million of dollars!

It was quite a striking picture just at that moment, and any enterprising artist would have jumped at the chance to transfer the scene either to canvas or to the sensitive plate of the camera.

The young and beautiful queen of burlesque, arrayed in the shimmering silken robe, the handsomest carriage dress that the drives of Central Park had seen for many a long day, with her hand thrown carelessly over the high back of a luxuriant armchair, and gazing with surprised face at the stranger; her position a model for the artist!

The jockey-like Englishman, in his checked suit of tweed, hat in hand, staring at the speaker in profound surprise; even the scanty side-whiskers of the acute Tim seemed to share the wonder and stick out more than usual.

And the stranger—this tall, thin, elderly man with the hawk-nose, restless black eyes, glittering like black beads; hair black as jet and cropped tightly to his head; olive face, smoothly shaven, but plainly betraying the dark-blue marks which told of a heavy beard were nature allowed her way; dressed in a shabby, thread-bare suit of black, very much out of style—the pantaloons baggy and loose—the coat long-skirted and single-breasted, buttoned up tight in the throat, no sign of linen being visible—standing by the door, his dilapidated slouch-hat in his hand, the other raised a trifle above his head after the style of the peculiar races of southern Europe who are nothing if not theatrical.

"A half a million of dollars!" he repeated. "So speak I and what I speak I know!" The man had a decided foreign accent. "Behold me, the Count, Phillippe de Castiglione!"

The same thought occurred at the same moment to both the listeners to this odd speech.

The man was a lunatic.

Avise was as brave as a lion; the girl did not really know what fear was, and so she gazed with steady eyes upon the stranger, but as for Tim he deftly sidled behind a chair and looked behind him for a weapon in case the man became violent.

"Mademoiselle, I have had the honor to see you on the boards of the theater many times," the man continued, addressing his conversation with a graceful bow to Avise. "Your face so beautiful—so charming! it is imprinted here, upon my heart. I see you many times—I do not recognize you at first, for it is long ago. I have had many troubles; my mind is not so good as it used to be; but at last it flashes upon me! Yes, you are the child; the child that in my arms I have held so often, but you do not remember me; no, it is impossible; it is so long ago!" and here the stranger heaved a deep sigh and let his head fall down upon his breast.

"Awfully cracked!" Tim ejaculated in a whisper to Avise.

The girl nodded; in her mind there was no doubt that the man was crazy; but he seemed a harmless sort of madman, and she was really curious to find out why he had wandered into her apartment and what the half-a-million of dollars was that he was raving about.

Another deep sigh came from the lips of the stranger, and then he raised his head and surveyed the fair face of the girl for a moment, in silence, with his glassy, restless eyes.

"Ah," he murmured at last, "the first time I see you, you touch a chord here in my heart. I say, Phillippe, mon brave, what does this mean? This English girl is fair—she is lovely—she is an angel—but passion died long since in your heart, now it is stone! Why seek you to gaze upon this face? I am not rich, mademoiselle. Italy—dear Italy! for her I am poor. I cannot pay one dollar every night; go in the gallery I cannot—the pride of an Italian nobleman forbids it!" and here the speaker patted his breast manfully. "What am I to do, since I must look upon your face or die?"

"Grab checks," suggested Tim, in a half undertone, and putting his tongue in his cheek and winking at the burlesque queen.

The man favored the Englishman with a gracious bow.

"The signor is correct," he said; "that is what I, Le Count de Castiglione, am obliged to do. I stand in front of the theater; around me my cloak is wrapped; there is a freemasonry among gentlemen; any gentleman with half an eye can see that I am of blue-blood. Between the acts of the play, when the gentlemen come out, I speak to them—I beg their pardon, I tell them that it is necessary to my existence that inside the theater I go. Some laugh, some jeer, all the same to me; I am a gentleman; it cannot hurt me; Le Count de Castiglione cannot be insulted. Some give me their checks and I walk in, others give me money. I say, 'I do not beg; an Italian nobleman cannot beg, but I will accept your money as a loan; when my property to me is restored, I will repay; and so, mademoiselle, without money, without price, I see you every night, and last night, at one sacred moment, the truth came to me; it was where you strike down the ruffian with your fist, and cry those lines of beautiful poetry:

"My name is Norval, I'm an old vet,
I'm bound to win or die, you bet!"

"In one moment I saw clearly; you are my child; I am your father!"

The burlesque queen was so much amazed that she could only stare in silence at this extremely peculiar speaker, but as for Tim, he fairly roared.

"Oh, blast my buttons!" he exclaimed, "if this ain't as good as a play!"

The man smiled—the peculiar, hollow, insincere smile which came so readily to him—shrugged his shoulders, and lifted his hands as if to protest against the Englishman's merriment.

"You do not believe me when I say that you are my child," he said, slowly.

"No; I do not—I know better!" Avise answered, quickly.

She was annoyed at the assumption.

"Oh, it won't work, old gentleman; it is too thin!" cried Tim, irreverently.

"And if out of the wealth which you enjoy, I should ask you for a small sum, you would refuse?"

"Course she would," the Englishman exclaimed.

"I tell you it won't wash. You can't come it, you know."

"Why, sir I think that you must be crazy!" Avise cried, not able to account for the stranger's actions at all, for there seemed to be a deal of method in his madness.

"And does the heart not speak to you?" the man continued, indifferent, apparently, to the effect his words had produced. "When I say, Child, I am your father, is there not a chord in your heart that is touched?"

"Oh, gammon! It won't do, you know; you can't play that sort of thing on us!" and the Englishman began to show anger.

"No, sir, not at all," replied the girl.

"And you would refuse me a loan—a small sum—say a hundred dollars—if I should ask it; I, your father—the father whom you have not seen since you were an infant in the cradle?"

"Yes, sir I should; I'll give you a dollar to get rid of you," Avise exclaimed, contemptuously, and as she spoke, she took two half-dollar pieces from her pocket book and cast them upon the floor at the stranger's feet.

Like a hawk he pounced down upon the silver pieces and secured them. It was quite plain that all was fish that came to his net, and that the smallest favors were thankfully received.

"From my heart, I thank you, my child," he exclaimed, bowing with great dignity. "You give me a dollar now; you do not know me; you mistrust me! Ah! great heaven, what agony it is for a father to be mistrusted by his own child!"—and all this spoken in the most matter-of-fact tone. "In one week you will know better; in one week—seven little days—your eyes will be open; you will come to me then and say, 'My honored parent, noble count, here is my purse; take what you like—a hundred—a thousand dollars if you will.' I help myself; I go to my lawyer; I say to him, here are the proofs that this beautiful lady is my daughter; here are the proofs that I am my father's son; here is money to reward your labor; go into the courts of this great republic, and cry aloud that justice may be done. He goes; we win; and a half a million dollars are ours! Addio."

And then, in his snaky way, the man bowed himself out of the room, leaving Avise and the Englishman staring at each other in intense amazement.

CHAPTER IX.

A BRACE OF RASCALS.

CLOSING the door of the actress's apartment carefully behind him, the tall, thin stranger, whose appearance so forcibly suggested the "Father of All Evil" as he is generally represented by the Italian painters—tall, thin, high cheek-bones, glittering, bead-like eyes, and a smile, sarcasm and melancholy strangely mixed—proceeded along the entry.

There was something snake-like about the man. His appearance instinctively produced aversion.

"Oh, saints in heaven!" he muttered, as he walked along the corridor, and as he spoke he stretched out his thin, brown hand, which with its long, skinny fingers so closely resembled the talons of a bird of prey, and surveyed the two glittering pieces of silver which reposed therein.

"One dollar—one miserable dollar to her own flesh and blood—to her father—to me, the man, who, by turning over his hand, can put one half-million of dollars into her pocket! Bah! Gratitude! it is a fable! Filial love! it exists not but in romance or at the opera. Why did she not throw herself upon my breast, and cry, 'Dear father! here in my heart find welcome!' Oh, these Englishers—these John Bulls! No souls, all stomach!"

The Italian heaved a deep sigh and pocketed the half-dollars. He was careful, however, to place the coins in separate pockets.

Descending the stairs to the office below in the main corridor, and marching along with head erect as though he was the most honored guest that the stately Fifth Avenue had ever sheltered, his appearance provoked instant suspicion.

It was plain that he had come from the upper part of the hotel, and as his garb and manner quickly told that he was not a guest, it was only natural that the clerk and porters who had observed him should instantly come to the conclusion that he was a sneak-thief, who had been prowling about the hotel intent on plunder.

"Say, what do you want here?" asked the clerk, quietly but firmly, confronting the Italian right at the foot of the stairs, while a couple of the porters gathered near ready to cut off the man's escape if he attempted to fly.

This operation was very adroitly performed so as not to excite attention. First-class hotels don't like to have it even supposed that suspicious characters can gain admittance at any time.

"Great heaven! Why do you ask?" exclaimed the stranger, in the extravagant, theatrical manner, so natural to him.

"You're not a guest of the hotel, and I want to

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know what you were doing up stairs. Come, speak out quick or I'll hand you over to the police," the clerk replied.

"Eternal powers! You would not dream of such an outrage!" the Italian exclaimed, not loudly, but in great astonishment, apparently.

"I will unless you give a satisfactory explanation."

"Listen then, although I protest against this interrogation," the Italian responded with great dignity. "I am an artist—the Signor Castiglione of the Grand Opera—a call I have had the honor to make upon the Mademoiselle Winne. I am poor; genius struggles ever with the dark angels of adversity. Mademoiselle Winne is as good as she is beautiful. I have come to her and tell my sad story, and she opens her purse-strings, bright, beautiful angel! and I now depart happy."

The clerk was inclined to believe this story, for his experience with the "children of genius" in the stage and opera line had brought him in contact with some pretty seedy customers. It was plain that the man was a gentleman, and he talked like an artist—a child of the Bohemian tribe; therefore the clerk apologized for his mistake, and explained how necessary it was to be cautious in a city hotel in regard to strangers.

"Say no more; it was your duty; from the bottom of my soul do I admire men who do their duty perform!" exclaimed the Italian, grandiloquently. "Pardon, signor, but will you favor me by taking a glass of wine with me? Everywhere I go, I hear it said there is no wine in America to compare with the nectar of the Fifth Avenue."

"Oh, excuse me; but you must take a drink with me!" replied the clerk, who was a jolly fellow naturally.

The Italian protested that he couldn't think of such a thing, but he marched up to the bar nevertheless and took his whisky like a man.

This social operation performed, he laid his skinny finger upon the arm of the other.

"The Mademoiselle Winne is an angel; with her money she is as free as water; at present I struggle in the waves of adversity. I, Phillippe de Castiglione, who as the principal tenor have sung before the kings and queens of Europe in all the good theaters—the Opera, Paree, La Scola, Milan. Here in America the directors do not see it; they go back on me, diavolo! I starve but for that bright angel, the Mademoiselle Winne! I presume there will be no objection to my coming here to see her sometimes?"

"Oh, no, now that we know who you are."

The clerk hadn't a doubt in regard to the man's story. He was so much like the genuine article—the imported artist, "down on his luck" that even the experienced hotel man was taken in.

"Thanks! In my prayers I shall remember your kindness, and when I make my "hit"—the time will come—and all New York is at my feet throwing largess, I will not forget my generous benefactor! No! your kindness repay I will a thousand-fold!" And then, with a graceful, dignified bow, the Italian marched out of the hotel.

Outside, a comrade awaited the signor.

An Italian, too, apparently, but quite a contrast to the noble count, being short and thick and fat. He was dressed in a shabby black suit, much too large for him, and a dozen years at least behind the prevailing fashion.

Like the other, his coat was buttoned up tight in the throat, and no linen was visible. It was odds that he didn't possess any.

His face, like his person, was fat, very dark in color, the chin ornamented by a peaked beard, and the thick-lipped mouth shaded by a huge mustache, the ends carefully waxed. His little, evil-looking eyes were like two jet-black beads, and the smell of garlic that came from his person was enough to sicken one who detested that pungent vegetable, so dear to the heart of the Latin races.

Colonel Anselmo del Frascati, this individual was called, and, as if to give proof that he had a right to the military title, he bore a switch in his hand, which he either flourished, saber-like, in the air, or else beat against the legs of his pantaloons.

"Ha, ha!" he exclaimed, as the tall man emerged from the hotel, "you have been long! How goes the fight? Did she see ze point, hey?"

The count shook his head.

"And you got nothing, diavolo?"

The count displayed a single half-dollar.

"Bah! that is a dinner only; did you tell her of ze half a million, hey?"

"Yes."

"And she nothing make of it, hey?"

"No."

"I have a-wait for you some time."

"Be calm, my friend," and he laid his skinny finger on the greasy coat-sleeve of the other. "I have made the acquaintance of one of the hotel young men. I am a singer at the opera and come to see the Mademoiselle Winne as a brother artist."

"Ha, ha! it is good—beautiful—divine!"

"Come, we will dine?"

The two proceeded down the street, and as they went, the snaky Italian unfolded his plan.

"If we do not succeed—if the heir we do not find, a prize we can make here," and the speaker nodded back to the hotel.

"Diavolo! that is superb; how?"

"Jewels—real, no paste!" the count explained, mysteriously. "Five thousand dollars' worth—more, maybe. I am an opera singer; they will not suspect me in the hotel, for I call upon the Mademoiselle Winne. The lock is nothing—bah! a child could open it; so easy!"

"Ten devils, but that is good!"

"We can make no money out of the half a million; we watch our chance and steal the jewels. South

America is near; many countrymen of ours there; we will go. Five thousand dollars; it is a fortune!"

"But I have ze other girl found."

"Ha, ha!"

"Ze image of ze picture, but hair dark!"

"Good! We will have our pickings out of the half million, after all!"

CHAPTER X.

RONALD CRAIGE.

The farce with which the evening's performance commenced at Wallack's was over; the farce was merely to play the audience into their seats so that the burlesque might be displayed to a full house, and to those who did come early the farce was a sort of appetizer to prepare the mind for the full enjoyment of the attraction of the evening.

With the farce Ronald Craige's duties for the evening terminated, as he was not gifted with the talents necessary to the burlesque artist. He could neither sing a comic negro song, nor dance the soul-inspiring breakdown; flip-flops were foreign to his nature; nor could he assume the garb of the other sex and charm an enlightened audience by a coarse caricature of a pretty woman.

And therefore, as the young man was a student and a gentleman, one who had embraced the stage from sheer love of the player's art, it naturally followed that he held a subordinate position at the meager salary of twenty dollars per week, out of which he was expected to dress in the height of fashion, while the burlesque artists' pay ranged from thirty per week up to a thousand.

But the young man had chosen his vocation, and although heartily sick of the life couldn't very well get out of it—so crowded are all the avenues that lead to a competence, nowadays.

A sober, steady, hard-working young fellow was the actor, with few enemies, and not a great many friends either, for the semi-wild life common to nearly all the followers of the stage was not at all to his liking. He was emphatically a student and all the time was studying hard, striving to fit himself for some other pursuit than the one which he was now following.

The artist world that knew Ronald Craige called him proud and stuck-up, and resented his holding himself aloof from their gay gatherings.

But the young man was not proud; he was simply a gentleman in his instincts, who chose to pick his associates.

Some of the sons and daughters of the Thespian art are as worthy people as can be found in all the wide world; but then, there are others, so tainted in mind and morals, that to be compelled to associate with them was, to a pure-hearted fellow like Ronald Craige, as dreadful as to herd with the felon hosts of Sing Sing.

And because he held apart from these unworthy creatures, the bane and degradation of a noble art—pure in itself as its sisters, painting and sculpture—the artist-world "made mouths" at the young man.

Little he cared though, for he was striving with all his might to escape from the circle of fire which surrounded him; if the world in which he now lived was angry because he would not associate with it, he despised that world and its opinion.

The beautiful burlesque actress, the dashing Avisé Winne, could not understand why the young man seemed so dull to the favor which she was lavishing upon him. He was not blind, did not lack sense, and yet he did not manifest the slightest interest in Avisé Winne, although, just at that time, half the empty-headed young men—some old ones too, for that matter—in New York were running madly after the charming queen of the blondes.

Avisé, shrewd and cunning, believed that she had a rival, and so she had dispatched her man-of-all-work, the patient and untiring Timoleon, in quest of information, and with what result the reader already knows.

At nine o'clock Craige had changed his stage costume for his usual street dress, and was on his way home.

Avisé, as usual, had taken particular care to encounter him as he made his way to the back-door of the theater, as she invariably did, every evening, so as to be able to exchange a few words with him.

The actress's intent was so apparent that the young man could not very well avoid her, but with his cool, easy politeness he never gave her cause to hope that he was being roused to that pitch of passion which was raging within her fair veins. A few commonplace remarks he would make, then bid her "good-night" and depart, leaving the proud young actress ready to flame out in open rage.

Straight to his home Craige proceeded, and as he walked along, he mused upon the peculiar position in which he was placed.

"Deuce take the girl!" he muttered, thoroughly vexed by Avisé Winne's open and avowed liking, so keenly expressed. "She has got everybody talking about us now! What on earth has got into her? I should think that she could see with half an eye that I don't care for her, and that I am trying to keep away from her all I can. I shall get into trouble, soon. She will get angry, and if she chooses to try, she can have my engagement annulled; women do these mean things sometimes; and then I shall probably be obliged to live idle all summer, and spend the little sum that I've put by for a rainy day. I can see no way to avoid the difficulty. I can't bear the girl, and I'm not going to lie to her. It will be either love or hate, and as I can't go the former, I presume the latter will soon come."

And now we will take advantage of the glare of the gaslight, as the actor passes, to take a good look at him, and we do not wonder at the preference so

keenly shown by the blonde burlesque queen for the young man.

In person about the medium height, well-built and finely proportioned; clearly-cut features, regular and pleasing; honest brown eyes, chestnut hair, curling slightly, broad forehead, plenty of room for brains there: in fine, a general appearance calculated to win friends at the first glance.

The actor had turned from Broadway, after leaving the theater, the walk down through New York's great artery being so much more pleasant than the way through the side-streets; then he had gone through Grand street until he arrived at Baxter.

Walking leisurely along, absorbed in his thoughts, which, as we have seen, were not very pleasant ones, Craige had never taken any particular notice of what was going on around him. In fact he had never once looked back, therefore he had no suspicion at all that, from the time of leaving the theater until he arrived at the corner of Grand street and Baxter, he had been closely followed by two men, who could not have stuck to him better if they had been his shadow, by some miracle doubled.

And these two men were afraid, too, that the actor would discover that they were following him, for they took particular pains to keep in the shadows as much as possible.

But as Craige hadn't the slightest idea that anyone would trouble their head about him, in such a fashion, the precaution of the two men was clearly needless.

As the actor walked up Baxter street toward the old brick barracks, where he had his quarters, he noticed that there were two figures standing upon the stoop, busy in conversation. And as he came nearer he could distinguish that one was a woman and the other a man.

And just as he ascertained this, the man raised his hat politely, bid the female good-night, a salutation which she returned, and then came down the street toward Grand, passing within arm's-length of the actor.

Craige had recognized the voice of the woman; it was the Bouquet Girl, Frank, and a natural curiosity therefore made him take a good look at the man with whom she had been talking, the more so, because he saw that the stranger was dressed in the height of style—in fact, a little over-dressed.

The man, busy with his own thoughts, passed by the actor without noticing him in the least, but Craige recognized him at once, although not personally acquainted with him, for Captain Jack Leipper, the famous divorce lawyer, was one of the notables of New York; few well-informed men who were not acquainted with the dashy figure of the lawyer, always so elegantly attired.

The actor, upon discovering who the gentleman was, stood still for a moment and looked after him.

The girl standing upon the stoop of the old barracks was surely the Bouquet Girl; he had clearly recognized her voice; but what business had this notorious divorce lawyer with her?

Determined to solve the riddle at once, the actor proceeded straight to the house. The two men who had followed him were snugly hid in a dark doorway on the other side of the street.

"Why, Frank, what did that fellow want?" the actor asked.

"Not much," answered the girl, smiling a glad welcome; "he only wants to make me a present of half a million of dollars."

CHAPTER XI.

THE EXECUTORS.

CAPTAIN JACK's office was situated in the fourth story of one of the handsomest buildings on lower Broadway; rather high if one ascended by the stairs, but then in this age of luxuries, no one thinks of climbing heavenward in that manner when the "elevators" afford such a ready means of access to the upper chambers.

The sanctum of the lawyer was fitted up in the most luxuriant manner; the "Modoc" of the bar believed in style and show, for all of which his unlucky clients paid, of course.

On the morning after the night when his recognition by the actor had excited so much astonishment in the breast of the latter, the lawyer sat in his comfortable easy-chair enjoying a fragrant cigar, and glancing at the morning journal, which he held in his hand, every now and then.

The daintily ornamented clock upon the wall chimed ten in its silver tones. The lawyer tossed the paper upon the table and looked expectantly at the door.

"That's the hour," he murmured, "and they are generally very punctual. I think that I have engineered this affair pretty well," and he rubbed his soft white palms together in a manner that plainly evinced great satisfaction. "And to think, too, that it all proceeded from my indulging in a few more glasses of champagne than is usual with me! If it had not been for the wine the idea would never have entered my head. It's a bold scheme, but boldness always suits me," and he smiled complacently as he surveyed his dashy, handsome face in the glass. "Tax will I am pretty sure of, and as for Dodson, he hates trouble and will be apt to agree with us in everything. I have examined the matter thoroughly, and I can't see a weak spot."

The lawyer's agreeable meditations were interrupted by the entrance into the office of a fat, middle-aged gentleman. He was short and stout, English evidently by the "cut of his jib," as a nautical man would say, and dressed in plain, old-fashioned garments.

With his fat, honest face, puffy cheeks and aldermanic stomach, he exactly resembled the "John Bull" of the artists who "do" the cartoons for the illustrated journals.

This was Mr. Peter Dodson, formerly chief-cook of old Vendotena's confectionery establishment.

"On time, eh?" exclaimed the easy-going Englishman, glancing at the clock.

"Oh, yes, right to the minute; hot, isn't it?"

"Hot? by Jove, sir, it is! We never have it like this at 'ome, you know."

Like nearly all his tribe, this burly Briton was always talking about 'ome, although he never manifested any intention of going there.

"Try a glass of wine," suggested Captain Jack, producing a bottle of Chateau Lafitte from a handsome sideboard, upon the top of which a pitcher of ice-water and some crystal goblets were standing.

"Thank'e; don't care if I do," and the Englishman smacked his lips as his hand caressed the bottle. Dearly this son of Britain loved the creature comforts of this life.

And as Mr. Dodson proceeded to enjoy the contents of the goblet another gentleman hustled into the room—a tall, thin man, well advanced in years, dressed in the height of fashion, but showing plainly by his manner that he was no slave to luxurious ease; in fact, a practiced medical eye would have detected at a glance that the man was terribly overworked—that his whole nervous system was shattered, and that nothing was more likely than that this driving man of business might be stricken down at any moment by the grim hand of Death, despite the brisk promise of life that his nervous, energetic manner inspired.

This was Mortimer Taxwill, esquire, well-known in Wall street as a heavy operator in stocks, and reputed to be worth a great deal of money.

Dodson and Taxwill were the executors of the will of the old confectioner, Lorenzo Vendotena, and Captain Jack was the lawyer who had drawn the will.

The old confectioner's illness had been a short one, but he had been fully conscious that he was coming nearer and nearer to the end each day, and so he had prepared his will.

The lonely old man in his last moments had relented somewhat; he had neither kith nor kin in the world, with the exception of his son and that son's daughter. When the Jersey lawyer, Limowell, had discovered that the mother was dead, he had waited upon old Vendotena with the news, and had informed him that the child was safe and in his hands.

The Italian had received him curtly and dismissed him abruptly.

"I take no interest in either the mother or child!" he exclaimed, angrily. "Not one penny of my money shall ever come to either of them."

But in his last hours the confectioner relented. After all, the child was of his blood; she was innocent of all wrong; the mother, against whom he had been so bitter, was in her grave; death had canceled the account. Better then that his wealth should go to the innocent child, who was of the Vendotena race, than pass into the hands of strangers.

But Antonio, the son, the legal heir?

The old man's rage against the son that had so rudely upset the father's schemes, had never abated; on his death-bed he was as bitter as ever against his unruly son.

"A rogue! a villain!" he cried, in sullen rage. "Even in Europe he disgraces the name he bears. The Vendotenas have always been honest people; poor, but no rascals. This wretch! he will get himself hanged if he keeps on! Not a single penny would I leave him, except to cheat the hangman, for without money the gallows will surely clutch him."

And so to the luckless Antonio he bequeathed the sum of one thousand dollars, and the interest of ten thousand dollars, which was securely invested to him as long as he lived, and at his death the principal to go to the Little Sisters of the Poor, a Catholic society in which the old man took a great interest.

The rest of his fortune, roughly estimated at half a million of dollars, he left, without proviso or condition of any kind, to his granddaughter, Francesca, the child of his son, Antonio.

Brief and directly to the point was the will.

The two executors whom the old Italian had chosen were men whom he believed he could fully rely upon.

Mortimer Taxwill had been his cashier for years, while Peter Dodson had entered his employ as chief in the cooking department when he had first started his confectionery on Broadway. And when old Vendotena had retired from business he had disposed of his establishment to his cashier and foreman, who were allowed to retain the old sign, excepting that instead of simple "Vendotena," the firm was now termed Vendotena & Co.

One year had now elapsed between the date of the old man's death and the period of which we write, and between the birth of the daughter, to whom the half-million had been bequeathed, and the present time, some seventeen years had passed, so that the child if living would be about eighteen.

The Italian had retired from business just after the secret marriage of his son, and in the interval from that time to the present, the two partners in the confectionery had made a fortune and sold out, Dodson to retire to a quiet country home and amuse himself with a little amateur farming, Taxwill to plunge into the mazes of the stock exchange and there endeavor to swell the competence he already possessed to a princely sum.

How he had succeeded no one knew; some said that he had been extremely lucky and was already a millionaire. Others cried positively that he had lost every cent that he had in the world, and was now "going it" on credit alone, and that when the time came for his creditors to insist upon getting their money, the balloon would collapse and Morti-

mer Taxwill would appear to the world in his true character of a beggar.

And to these two men, so opposite in their natures, yet both equally trusted by the old Italian, was the carrying-out of the will he had made intrusted.

To Peter Dodson, easy and slow-going, honest as the day, simple as a child, though not deficient in a sort of natural shrewdness, and Mortimer Taxwill, wily speculator—his foes said, "totally unscrupulous," but that was slander, perhaps—and Captain Jack, the "Modoc of the bar," the care of the enormous fortune had been confided.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LONG-LOST HEIR.

"AHA! enjoying yourself as usual!" Taxwell exclaimed, perceiving the occupation of the Englishman.

"So beastly 'ot, you know; 'ave a go?" and Dodson, in the true spirit of hospitality, filled out a glass of wine for the speculator.

The lawyer brought him a chair; Taxwill pulled off his gloves and flung himself into the seat, and tossed off the wine at a draught, so different to the leisurely way in which the Englishman was enjoying the vintage of the vine.

"And now we will proceed at once to business," Captain Jack said, perceiving that his visitors were fully prepared for serious matters. "It is in reference to the Vendotena estate."

"I thought so the moment I saw Dodson here," Taxwill remarked.

"Well, I 'ope you've found the young woman," Dodson observed.

"That is exactly what I have succeeded in doing."

There was quite a little bit of triumph perceptible in the voice of the lawyer as he spoke.

The effect produced by the speech upon the two executors was widely different.

The burly Briton drew a long breath; he hated business, and this trust—this enormous fortune confided to him—care-worried him; naturally, therefore, he was extremely glad that the burden was about to be taken off his shoulders, and in his round, rosy face, joy was plainly indicated.

Taxwill, on the contrary, pursed up his mouth, contracted his eyebrows a bit, and looked at the lawyer in an extremely suspicious way.

Captain Jack did not appear to notice the look, but he did, though, for very few things escaped his keen eyes.

"Well, dang my buttons, if I ain't thankful!" Dodson exclaimed. "Sich responsibilities ain't a bit to my taste. I've done with business; I don't want to do nothin' in the world but enjoy myself. And so you've found the little gal? Well, now, I thought you would."

"You have found the heir?" Taxwill questioned, in his sharp, direct way.

"Yes, sir."

"Ah—hum—that's lucky!"

Few words, but a deal of suspicion, introduced in the sentence.

"And all by accident, too."

"You don't say so?" the burly Briton cried, full of curiosity.

"By accident, eh?" Taxwill was watching the lawyer as a cat would watch a mouse.

"Yes, gentlemen, truth is stranger than fiction, you know; but my meeting with this girl is like a leaf torn out of a romance. I was going toward Fulton Ferry, and stopped to buy a bouquet from a flower-girl just outside the gate. She was a pretty little thing, and perceiving that she was so different from the usual run of bouquet girls, I entered into conversation with her. There was something about her face that seemed very familiar to me, and yet it did not appear to be the face of anyone whom I have ever known, and while I was talking to her, trying to account for the impression which her face had made, all of a sudden the truth flashed upon me. When I first attempted to hunt up this lost heir, the principal thing that I relied upon was a handsomely painted picture on ivory of the mother. If you remember, the old gentleman, just before his death, gave it to me, stating at the time that his son, Antonio, had sent it to him immediately after his secret marriage. Bitter as the old man had been in regard to the young girl who he believed had entrapped his son into a marriage solely for his money, still he had preserved the picture. With this picture as a guide, as you may remember, I went to Long Branch to hunt up this Limowell, the uncle of the wife, who had had charge of the child. Probably you will recollect that my search was a fruitless one. Limowell had resided there, but had moved away, and no one knew where. The girl had been with him—in fact, two girls, both of whom he called his nieces, and both had gone also. It was a difficult matter to find out anything about this Limowell, for he lived back in what the natives termed 'the pines,' a barren sandy waste between Long Branch and Branchburg, and kept himself quite secluded."

"You advertised for him pretty extensively, too," Taxwill remarked.

"Yes, but without avail. Well, to make a long story short, the girl was the very image of the picture which I possessed, and upon questioning her carefully, without, of course, saying anything in regard to the suspicion which I had as to who she was, I soon knew the story of her life. As I suspected, she was the long-lost heir. Her name was Francesca, Fulton Frank her associates called her. She had been brought up at Branchburg by Lysander Limowell; her mother, Limowell's niece, had married the son of a wealthy New Yorker, who had been disowned on account of the marriage; she had been brought up by Mr. Limowell, her mother dying

when she was quite small; she had been ill-treated by her uncle and had run away to New York to seek her fortune."

"'Ow very romantic!" exclaimed Dodson, who had listened attentively to the recital.

"Very!" Taxwill cried, dryly.

Captain Jack took no notice at all of the peculiar tone, and as for Dodson, the honest Briton never perceived it.

"Well, as I said before, I'm deuced glad that the beastly thing is going to be settled," declared the Englishman; "I want it off my mind, you know."

"I suppose you will be able to prove that this girl is the heir—that is, prove her identity?" Taxwill asked, his tone plainly indicating the doubts in his mind.

"Oh, yes; no doubt about it at all," Captain Jack answered, in his airy, easy way. "And now, if you will fix a time, I'll present the girl to you."

"'Ow will this afternoon do?" asked Dodson, in his blunt way. "I've got to buy some stuff in town, and I would like to go 'ome by the last train to-day."

"This afternoon will suit me," Taxwill remarked.

"This afternoon, at three, then."

"All right; and now I must toddle off, for I've a lot of things to do. I don't come to town every day, you know." And then the Briton departed.

Taxwill favored the lawyer with a long, suspicious glance after the door had closed on the burly figure of the Englishman.

"What's the matter?" Captain Jack asked, blandly.

"Come, come! This story may do for Dodson, who is as stupid as a child about some things, but I don't swallow it!" the speculator exclaimed, quickly.

"You don't believe that I have found the heir?"

"No, I do not."

"It's a fact."

"Gammon!"

"Well, she'll pass for the heir anyway; her name is Francesca, and she was brought up by this man Limowell, who did have custody of the child."

"But she is not the child!"

"That's a doubtful point; but it will be money in our pockets for us to believe that she is."

"How so?"

This was business, and the speculator was quick to appreciate it.

"A half a million of dollars is a pretty large sum to any one; to a girl who has been making a dollar a day by selling bouquets at the ferries, it seems a fabulous amount. Without our aid the girl couldn't touch a penny of the property. I have made a fair bargain with her."

"How much?"

"One clear half."

"That will do."

"And that half, after deducting the necessary expenses, I propose to cut into two equal parts."

"One for me, eh?" The speculator was quick to jump to conclusions.

"Yes; provided that you believe that she is the heir."

"Oh, I guess that there is no doubt about that," Taxwill reassured the other, with a knowing laugh.

"But will the legal proof be enough?"

"Oh, yes, provided Limowell don't turn up."

"And if he does?"

"We must buy him up."

And so the compact was made.

CHAPTER XIII.

FRANK'S STORY.

"A HALF a million of dollars!" Craige exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Yes; it is a large sum, isn't it?"

"Well, I should say so, but I don't understand!" the bewildered actor protested.

"You know that gentleman is a lawyer?"

"Yes; and not a very reputable one, either."

"He met me at Fulton Ferry the other night; he had been drinking, and I suppose the liquor put the idea into his head, for he asked my name, how old I was, and then told me that I was the heir to a fortune of half a million of dollars."

"You had better be on your guard, Frank," Craige said, seriously. "This fellow is totally unscrupulous. He has already been concerned in some ugly scrapes, and how he manages to escape from being 'thrown over the bars,' as the lawyers say, which means expulsion from the legal fraternity, is a mystery."

"Oh, he intends to pay himself well for the services which he is to perform; he does not serve me for nothing; he is honest about it. He came to-night especially to hear the story of my life, and after I had told him all I knew in regard to my birth and early childhood, he said that in his mind there was no doubt that I was the long-lost heir."

"Long-lost heir!" Craige exclaimed. "Yes, that is the way the story-writers always put it. But how did the man happen to think that you were the heir? That is something I don't understand."

"He has a picture of my mother, and recognized me from my resemblance to it."

Craige was puzzled; he distrusted the wily Captain Jack, and suspected that there was some deep-laid plan at the bottom of all this. Fortunes of half a million did not usually wait long for heirs.

"The fellow is a regular rascal, I am sure; I have heard of two or three of his tricks, and I am afraid that there is more in this than appears on the surface."

"Oh, no; I think not," replied the girl. "He has made a good bargain for himself, and will make more than I will if he succeeds in getting the money."

"What is he to receive for his valuable services?"

"One half."

"A quarter of a million, eh?"

"Yes; and out of my half are to come all the expenses."

"He will be paid pretty well; but it is not so bad, considering that without him you would not, probably, be able to get anything."

"Yes; he is to find all the necessary proofs."

"But can he prove that you *are* the heir?"

"He says he can."

"But *are* you the heir? Do you think you are?"

"Well, I don't know what to think," the girl answered. "I'll tell you the story, and you can decide. The half a million is the fortune left by an old gentleman, Vendotena by name, who used to keep a confectionery store on Broadway."

"Yes, I know the place; many a dish of ice-cream I've had there."

The son of the old gentleman—an only son—secretly married a young country girl at Long Branch, and the father never forgave him. The wife was named Decetra Limowell, and about two years after her marriage she died, leaving a baby girl. That child was brought up by this Limowell, who was a lawyer. When the old gentleman died, about eighteen years after the marriage of his son, he made a will leaving all his property to his granddaughter, Francesca, the child of Decetra. This Mr. Leipper was the lawyer who drew out the will. He went in search of the child, now a girl of eighteen, but could find no trace of her at all, or of Mr. Limowell, who had taken care of her. He had lived at Long Branch, or, to speak more correctly, near Long Branch, in a very lonely spot, and had gone away, no one knew where or when. That's the story of the heir; now hear mine. I don't know who my father or mother was, or anything about them. Ever since I can remember I lived with a Mr. Limowell in a lonely house near Long Branch. I was told that my name was Francesca, but whenever I asked about my father and mother, I was told that they were both dead, long ago, and that I mustn't ask any questions. Mr. Limowell was a harsh, stern man, so ugly in temper that I fairly grew to hate the very sight of him. About a year ago he brought a young man to the house, introduced him to me, and said that he was to be my husband. That very night I ran away and came to New York. Brown Betty, an old colored woman who took care of the house and had always looked out for me since I was a child, advised me to take the step. I had twenty-five dollars which I had saved up, and I knew that would keep me until I found something to do. Brown Betty knew Mrs. O'Hoolihan and sent me here. Now compare the two stories; have I not reason to believe that I *am* the missing heir for whom this fortune of half a million dollars waits?"

Craigie was thoroughly astonished. It was more than probable, and his quick mind speedily comprehended how easily a skillful lawyer, particularly one not over scrupulous, could supply the missing links in the chain of evidence.

"Well, it certainly does look as if you were the heir."

"Am I not justified, then, in accepting the fortune that chance throws into my lap?"

"Most certainly! It would be tempting Providence to refuse."

"And think, too, of the happiness that such a vast sum of money will bring me."

"Money does not always bring happiness, you know."

"Ah, yes, but it does if it is rightly used," the girl cried, eagerly. "It won't turn my head, either, although I have been used to poverty all my life."

"That's good."

"And I shall be able to pay the debts I owe."

"Do you owe many?"

"Oh, no; you are my greatest creditor," and the pretty girl rested her little hand upon the arm of the young man and looked him full in the face with her great dark eyes, now moistened with emotion.

Craigie was visibly affected, but he was an honest-hearted fellow, and seldom tried to conceal his feelings.

"Why, what do you owe me?"

"Everything!" the girl exclaimed, impulsively; "haven't you tried to educate me—to teach me how to avoid danger in the narrow lane of life which fate forced me to tread? Do you think that I shall ever forget your kindness? Oh, no! Why, my first thought, Ronald, when I was told that I was the heir to all this money, was that I should be able to repay you!"

"And how do you intend to repay me?" the actor asked, smiling at the eager, upturned face.

"Oh, I don't know! You must tell me. You don't like the stage; I have heard you say so a hundred times, and now you will be able to leave it."

"I don't exactly see how you manage to figure that out," Craigie observed, laughing. "I haven't come in for a fortune of half a million, you know."

"You have always been ready to help me when I needed help," she replied, "and now, when I get this money, I shall consider it as much yours as mine."

A moment the young actor gazed earnestly into the expressive face, the dusk of the night partly concealing the blushes which flooded throat, cheeks and temples, and then, with a gentle motion, he extended his arms and drew the young girl gently to his manly breast.

"Why, little one," he said, "do you think that I am the sort of man to take any unfair advantage? Just think of the prospect that lies before you. A half a million of dollars! Why, with such a sum of money as that you can buy your way into the best society in the country. Few circles in this great

republic so select as to ask 'Who or what is she? No; the question generally put is, 'How much is she worth?' Gold is the touch-stone which tries all mankind. I am a poor man, something of a scholar, but, like a fool, I have chosen a profession, the pursuit of which brings no honor. In the eyes of two-thirds of the world, the actor is still a vagabond, just as he used to be considered legally, in the old English time, when the stocks and the whipping-post awaited him if he chanced to merit the displeasure of some petty official. You will be a rich young lady, an heiress; do you think that I, really an outcast from the charmed circle called society, would try to hamper you by recalling to your memory the old days when we were both poor together? Oh, no, Frank; I am no such man. Accept the gift that fortune gives and forget that I live."

"Bless you, my children!" cried a hoarse voice, in foreign accents; "I, your farder, bless you!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED ANNOUNCEMENT.

CONSIDERABLY astonished at this unexpected interruption, both the actor and the girl turned in surprise to gaze upon the speaker.

In the gloom of the night, they beheld a tall, thin man, evidently a foreigner, with a hawk-like face, clad entirely in black—a very shabby-looking gentleman, indeed.

"Bless you, my children!" repeated the stranger, waving his thin, talon-like hands majestically in the air. "To the heart it joys me to see such trust and love. From across the stormy seas I come—from the old world, dying by inches—to this fresh young land, all for the purpose of seeing you, my dear mademoiselle. Do not start! Gasp not! I am your farder!" And, as he made this startling announcement, the speech uttered in a manner that would have made the fortune of a melodramatic actor, the man struck an attitude, and extended his arms pathetically toward the girl.

But Frank didn't evince the least inclination to rush into his arms, as he evidently had expected. On the contrary, she shrunk from him, fully convinced that he was either under the influence of liquor or else that he was a lunatic.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" the actor demanded, with scant ceremony.

The stranger drew himself up with an air of great dignity.

"Behold in me this mademoiselle's natural protector!" he exclaimed. "I have come all the way from the sunny skies of fair Italy that I might look upon ze face of zis lady—that I might fold her to my beating heart and zay—rest you there, tranquil, my own stricken dear! Judge, then, noble young man, how joys the great heart within this careworn breast to find that she has a lover like yourself. I am happy, I am content!"

Craigie felt a strong disposition to kick the stranger for his impertinence, for he felt decidedly annoyed; but with an effort he restrained himself.

"You'll excuse the question, but who are you, and by what right do you claim to be this lady's natural protector?"

"Soft! Speak low! The very stones have ears!" the stranger cried, mysteriously.

"Eh?" exclaimed Craigie, in amazement.

"Behold in me the leader of the Carbonari!" the man said, in a loud whisper. "With Garibaldi I have stood side by side; kings and emperors tremble when they hear the name of Cæsar Blondella! But I have enemies—the rulers of Europe—who hate me because I preach freedom to all mankind; they pursue me even here in free America; with the dagger of the assassin they would stifle me, because I am the advocate of the people. Ha, ha! But I laugh at my foes; I spit upon them, because in my breast I carry the heart of a lion!"

Craigie had listened to this rigmarole with impatience; it was not the first time that he had encountered these "friends of the people," who generally left their country for their country's good. Hardly a beer-shop in New York without one or more of these political spouters, blatant demagogues, who toil not, but live on what they *filch* from better men.

"But you haven't answered my question, sir?" Craigie exclaimed, impatiently. "By what right do you address this young lady? You are no acquaintance!"

"Am I not?" cried the Italian—for such he evidently was—with great dignity. "And I do not know her either!—oh, no! Her father, Antonio Vendotena, and myself were not bosom friends! Diavolo! no! With his dying breath he did not say to me, 'Cæsar, brother-in-arms, far across the seas, in free America, my only daughter dwells; go to her; bear a dying father's blessing; be thou to her a father in my place. A fortune of half-a-million of dollars waits for her; bring to her aid your great—your magnificent—brain and your bold heart; secure for her the money, and she will reward you with a gift so great that you can return to Italy and fight once again for freedom!' He did not say this, no! I am dreaming or mad! And as he finished the speech, he drew himself up with stately dignity, and glared theatrically around him.

The murder was out now, and Craigie fully understood the little game of this grandiloquent foreigner. In some way he had learned that the girl was supposed to be the lost heir to the Vendotena estate, and he was endeavoring to profit by the knowledge.

"Haven't you made some mistake?" the actor asked. "Are you *quite* sure that this lady is the person you take her to be?"

"Aha! you are wise! I do not blame you—cautious! It is good!" the Italian exclaimed, in the emphatic manner so natural to him. "But I know of what I speak. The first time I look upon the face of this dear mademoiselle, I see there the eyes of my

brave companion. He tell me before he die, 'In New York, somewhere, you will find my child; be thou a father to her;' and I say, 'I will.' Mademoiselle, perhaps, does not know who she is—she does not know the bright fortune that is in store for her—the bright fortune that this hand can give her."

"Perhaps you had better explain," Craigie suggested.

"I will," the stranger said, and then with uplifted fore-finger he began: "By name Francesca Vendotena—that is you; daughter of Antonio Vendotena and his wife, Decetra: grand-daughter of Lorenzo Vendotena, the confectioner, and heir to his fortune of half a million of dollars. It is a large amount; this hand can give it to you; your second farder am I, therefore come to my heart, my child!"

But the girl didn't manifest any intention of doing anything of the kind. She was astonished at the extent of the stranger's information; that was all.

"Do you mean to assert that you can *prove* the truth of this statement?" Craigie asked.

"I can," replied the Italian, quickly. "I have such proof that all the world will admit that I speak nothing but the truth. In my hands I hold the half million of dollars; of course you will pay me for my trouble. 'Tis not for myself I ask the money but for suffering Italy, my country. Italy! dear Italy! she would be free! No priest nor king should rule from the mountains to the sea, but one great, glorious republic! Of the half million that I shall get for you, you shall give me a half. With a quarter of a million I can do much. Money! it is everything in this life. Money! bah! I do not care for it myself but I will take it for the sake of my dear country."

This speech fully recalled to Craigie that his guess as to the motive of the Italian was quite correct. This patriotic son of the old Italian land was—to use the common term—a fraud of the first water.

"I am afraid that you are a little late in this matter," the actor said, taking it upon himself to speak for the girl. "This young lady's affairs are already in the hands of a lawyer, and as he has professed himself able to do all that you say you can accomplish, it would be hardly worth while for her to waste time upon your offer."

"A lawyer—ha!" and the seedy stranger gave one of his melo-dramatic starts.

"Yes."

"His name—how is he called?"

"Leipper."

The Italian shook his head; it was evident that he did not enjoy the honor of Captain Jack's acquaintance.

"His office is in Broadway; you'll find the address in the directory."

"And is your dear farder's dying words nothing?" cried the man with pathetic accent, abruptly addressing Frank. "Can you look me in the face—hear me a-speak and resist the impulse to cast your self upon my bosom?"

The girl shrunk back; instinctively she feared this glassy-eyed stranger.

The Italian heaved a deep sigh.

"Aha! blood is nothing! Bah! it is water!" he cried; "well, well, it is fate! I will see this lawyer. He and I will bargain together, *allons!*" And then off the man strode, leaving amazement behind him.

CHAPTER XV.

ALONE WITH THE DEAD.

WE must retrace our steps for a while and return to the shabbily furnished chamber in the old tenement-house, where, by the bedside of the dead girl, knelt the living one.

Death is always sad, no matter how it comes, and yet to this poor stricken deer, the icy touch of the dark angel had brought peace and rest—had ended her sorrow and given unto her the forgetfulness she craved.

Bitter had been her lot since the one short month which had succeeded her flight from her home with the man who had so earnestly sworn to cherish and protect her.

One month of happy wedded life and, then, day by day, the man who had persuaded her to leave home and friends cooled in his regard for her.

At last she woke to the bitter knowledge that she had been deceived; she complained not but accepted her burden with a patient heart. She loved the smiling, handsome villain who had so cruelly ruined all her young life and earnestly she strove by every means in her power to win back the affection which had once been so fervently expressed.

The task was hopeless; he had no affection to arouse; his heart was coldly callous and indifferent.

The man had wearied of his victim as a child grows tired of a toy; her patient, sorrowful face was a constant reproach to him; and so, at last, he struck the terrible blow which the deceived girl had apprehended.

Bluntly and coarsely one morning he told her that she was his wife no longer, that he had procured a divorce, and then he put into her hand a legal-looking paper, informed her that the rent of the furnished apartments, which they occupied, was paid until the 1st of the next month, and that, after that time, she must seek shelter elsewhere, threw a twenty-dollar note upon the table, and then departed, leaving his victim dazed by the awful shock.

And the poor child accepted her fate without even a protest!

In her ignorance of the world she believed that the man *had* procured a divorce, and that the decree of the obscure Iowa court, as the legal-looking paper purported to be, was the highest law.

And so, she went forth into the howling wilderness of the great city, to earn her bread by the work of her slender fingers.

Weak and delicate, the end soon came as we have described, and the patient searcher, who had roamed

up and down the streets of the great metropolis, knocking at every door, determined to find the lamb who had strayed from the family fold to fall the prey of the devouring wolf, succeeded in her task at last; but only to lose her again.

And at the very last moment, too, even as the body parted with its soul, the faith of the girl was true and she concealed the name of her destroyer. "I will not tell you!"

But now that death had come, and with his silent but powerful touch sealed the lips of the loved and lost forever, there was no hope of ever learning from her the name of the villain whose hand had so rudely thrust her into an untimely grave.

The patient girl who had so successfully accomplished the difficult task which she had taken upon herself, did not despair, though.

"She must have preserved something belonging to this man!" she exclaimed, rising from her position by the side of the stricken girl. "A letter—a scrap of his handwriting; I must learn the name of the villain! Surely, Heaven will some day put it in my power to punish him for this dreadful work!"

Few articles were there in the room, for, one by one, the weak girl, struggling against adverse fortune, had parted with every thing of value that she might procure the means to sustain life.

The womanly instinct had guessed truly; two written papers she found. The first a certificate of marriage, the contracting parties, James Ronnells and Pauline Montgomery. The second a decree of divorce, the pretext, abandonment, granted to James Ronnells.

"So, that is his name!" the girl cried, her eyes sparkling with anger; and then a sudden thought occurred to her. "Oh! how foolish I am!" she cried. "Is it likely that is the right name of this villain? Why, the chances are that he has a dozen names, for the man who could coolly ruin the life of a young, loving and innocent girl cannot be any common rascal!"

And as she meditated, turning the legal document carelessly in her hands, an indorsement upon the outside met her eyes.

The indorsement read, "Benard and Britman," in a bold, clerky hand.

"That is the firm of lawyers who got the divorce!" she exclaimed, conviction flashing upon her in an instant. "They will know who James Ronnells is, and they must tell me. Something within whispers me that I shall yet be an instrument in the hands of Heaven to punish this man for the wrong that he has done."

The girl continued her search, and an unfinished letter in the well-known hand of the dead woman rewarded her endeavors. It read as follows:

"DEAR SISTER: I feel that I have not very many days to live, for I am growing weaker and weaker; my hold on life is so slight that it may slip from my grasp at any moment. I have refrained from writing to you, although I have wished to, very much, because I was ashamed to tell you how terribly I have been deceived. Always have I been a willful, wayward girl, and for this terrible misery that has come upon me I have no one to blame but myself. But now, at the eleventh hour, I am going to write to you and tell you all my sad story; perhaps it may save you some time, from taking some such foolish step."

"Just twelve months ago to-day at a ball at one of the Long Branch hotels I made the acquaintance of a young New York gentleman. You know how I used to steal out of the house after night set in and uncle had retired to his room. I told you that I went to visit in the village, but I deceived you, for I used to meet a young man attached to one of the hotels, who was keeping company with a lady friend of mine in the village, and we would all drive over to Long Branch together."

"On one of these occasions I met with this New York gentleman. He seemed to be rich, spoke of his family and high connections, and I was ashamed to tell him that I was a niece of the man who bore such an evil name as our uncle did; and besides, being so foolishly romantic, I thought that he would not like me unless I pretended to be something better than I really was. So I told him a romantic story; I said that my name was Pauline Montgomery, and that I was an orphan and the heiress to a large estate which some day I expected to get. If you remember, dear, this was the story that uncle used to tell us, sometimes, when his senses were steeped in liquor. I did not do this to make the gentleman like me, for I thought him too noble and generous to be influenced by any such considerations. We saw each other frequently; and he professed great admiration for me, and I, poor, silly girl, loved him with all my heart. He urged me to a secret marriage and I consented. I left a note for uncle, telling him what I was going to do, and that, in time, I would write to him. I knew that he would be dreadfully enraged, for he always said that I would get him a fortune, some time."

"I went away with the gentleman and we were married. I did not tell him of my real name, and up to the present moment he is ignorant of it, for, soon after we were married I discovered that I had been deceived. My husband was an adventurer, if nothing worse. I could not find out anything about his business or how he made a living. Even his name was an assumed one. Soon he began to tire of me and bluntly he told me so, and then, one day, he handed me a paper which he said was a decree of divorce, and from that day to this I have never seen him. And now that I know the end is coming near, I feel a strange desire to see you. Come as soon as you can, I—"

And here the letter abruptly ended.

The sad story was fully told, though, and the heart

of the girl swelled with anger as she reflected upon the cruel outrage.

"I will find him, though!" she cried, with angry eyes. "Heaven will lead me to him and then put into my hand a weapon to crush him!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A CURIOUS QUEST.

It was a Sunday night; the heat intense; all the inhabitants of the lower part of New York seemingly were in the streets; the Bowery was crowded with people, the German gardens overflowing; the suffering sons of toil, with their wives and little ones, or with their sweethearts, were vainly endeavoring to get a breath of fresh air.

Opposite to the old tenement-house on Baxter street, now so intimately known to the readers of our story, in the shadows of a doorway, two people were standing.

They evidently courted concealment, for they were snugly ensconced within the doorway, and remained as motionless as statues.

One was tall and the other short—the tall one a woman, the short one a man.

The woman was muffled in a waterproof cloak, which completely concealed both face and figure. The man was attired in a plain black suit.

Just before the time when we called the reader's attention to the two, the man had come from the old brick barrack, crossed the street, and joined the woman.

"Well?" the female had demanded, in a voice full of question. Little use for the woman to disguise her figure if she used her voice, for any one who had ever heard the silvery notes of the blonde burlesque queen would have had no difficulty whatever in identifying the speaker—charming, dashing Avise Winne.

"They're hout," responded the man; and from the unmistakably English tone the energetic Timoleon Hodgkinson could easily be recognized.

"Both of them?"

"Yes, both on 'em; hout for a walk together."

The ripe red lips of the famous burlesque actress closed tightly, and there was an angry, steely glitter in her clear blue eyes.

"How did you find out?"

"Axed the old woman up-stairs; she's a Patlander. 'Does Mr. Craige live here?' says I. 'He do,' says she. 'And is he in?' says I. 'He is not,' says she. 'Will he be in soon, d'ye think?' says I. 'He will, shure!' says she. And then I took a look around the room, and I didn't see no signs of the gal, so I jest proceeded to pump the old woman. 'Did Mr. Craige's sister go out with him?' says I. 'He do have no sister,' says she; 'mebbe it's Miss Frank ye be afther m'aning?' Perhaps it is,' says I. 'Well, they're hout together,' says she. 'It's of no consequence,' says I, 'for it's only Mr. Craige that I want to see; and as you think he'll be back soon, I'll wait for him at the corner, and then I retired, gracefully."

"You have seen this girl?" Avise asked, abruptly. "As they say in 'Fr'isco, you bet!"

"Is she pretty?"

"Well, now, you know—"

"Oh, tell me the truth, Tim!" the actress cried, impatiently. "Don't stop to think what I would like to hear you say, but say what you think, honestly!"

"Well, now, she is rayther pretty."

"As pretty as I am?" and the young girl drew up her superb figure and swung back her proud head in the regal manner so becoming to her.

"Oh, no; she ain't got your style, you know; besides she ain't got the togs to rig out with."

"Is she light or dark?"

"Dark, I think," responded Tim, slowly. "Blessed ed if I'm sure of it, though!"

"There's some one turning the corner now—there's two!"

All through the brief conversation Avise had kept a watch upon the corner of the street.

Tim took a good look with his little, sharp eyes.

"That's our birds!" he exclaimed. "I'll cross over and stop him before he gets to the 'ouse, and you had better walk up the street a little way, and come down on the other side, so as to meet the girl afore she can get into the 'ouse."

"Yes, I will do it."

Tim at once hurried across the street to intercept the couple, who had just turned into Baxter street from Grand, and were strolling along leisurely, while the blonde burlesque queen hurried up the street and crossed over, so as to be able to meet the girl before she could get into the house.

"Hey, Mr. Craige!" Tim exclaimed, accosting the new-comers.

The actor and the bouquet-girl—for the couple were the two—halted.

"Hello! Is that you, Hodgkinson?" Craige asked, somewhat surprised at the encounter.

"Yes, I've been waiting for you for some time. Tompkins wants to see you at the Union Square Hotel right right away."

Tompkins was the potent manager who swayed the destinies of the blonde burlesque troupe.

"What's the matter?"

"There's got to be a change in the programme for to-morrow night, I believe, and they want to see you about it. Tompkins told me to bring you up right away."

"All right; I'll go along with you. You can find your way to the house, I presume," the actor said with a laugh to Frank.

"Oh, yes," she replied, cheerfully.

"I'll be back soon," and then, accompanied by Tim, he hurried away, and as they walked the inquisitive Englishman proceeded to question Craige in regard to the bouquet girl.

"Your sister, eh?"

"No," the actor answered, shortly.

"Your gal, eh? Well, she ain't bad-looking!"

Craige felt a strong impulse to tell the little Englishman that he had better mind his own business, but he refrained.

"Blamed if I shouldn't like such a gal as that myself," Tim continued. "Say I can't you introduce me?"

"See here, young man!" cried the actor, halting suddenly and facing the Englishman, with anger flaming in his eyes, "I don't relish your conversation, in regard to that young lady, and you'll oblige me by holding your tongue about her. I am not over-patient, and I don't wish to be annoyed."

"Well, my heyes! who said anything ag'in her, anyway?" Tim demanded, sullenly. "I thought this was a free country, and a man has got a right to talk, hain't he?"

"You had better keep quiet in regard to that lady unless you want to have trouble with me!" Craige exclaimed, sternly. "She is not one of your class; she don't kick up her heels to an admiring public at fifty cents a head."

"Oho! you talk as if you didn't like the profession?" growled the Englishman, the two again proceeding on their way.

By the "profession" Tim meant the stage-players.

"Well, I don't, the way things have got to be in the last few years. There was a time when an actor thought himself a little better than a circus-rider or a traveling mountebank, but now the artist who gives the better part of his life to the study of his art is on a par with the gentleman who exhibits the troupe of performing dogs; in fact, the dog-man is the better paid of the two."

"If you're too good you had better get out of it!" the Englishman sneered.

"I shall, as soon as I can," Craige replied, tersely.

There was very little more conversation between the two, for Tim was smarting over the check his insolence had received, and he mentally wished that he was big enough to give the stalwart young man a piece of his mind; but, that was a luxury which the physical proportions of Craige denied, at the present.

The august Tompkins, a burly, clumsy man, very much given to a lavish display of jewelry, was found at the hotel.

In a confidential, friendly sort of way for him, for Manager Tompkins really regarded himself as a man of note, he drew Craige to one side, and asked him if he could do certain things, provided certain events happened, and with a rambling conversation, chiefly consisting of abuse directed against the members of the troupe whom he fancied to be about to leave him, he managed to detain Craige about half an hour.

Craige said, naturally, that he would do all in his power, and there the matter ended. Much smoke but no fire.

But, the end in view was gained; Craige had been gotten out of the way, so that Avise could exchange a few words with the bouquet girl.

After the departure of her escort, Frank had walked directly to the house, but at the door she found herself confronted by a tall, handsome girl, who gazed at her with eyes wherein no friendly feeling was written.

CHAPTER XVII.

AVISE'S SCHEME.

"You are the bouquet girl?" the unknown said.

Frank was astonished at the question and rather inclined to resent the manner in which it was asked; the keen wit of the girl quickly detected the latent hostility of the speaker, but with a sense beyond her years, she repressed the desire to demand to know by what authority she was questioned, and replied simply:

"I sell bouquets sometimes, if that is what you mean."

"And your name is Frank?"

"Yes."

"You are a rather pretty girl," the blonde queen said, bluntly, "and yet not so bewitchingly beautiful as to be able to take my lover away from me."

Frank was utterly astounded as she listened to this strange sentence, the full meaning of which she did not comprehend, in the least.

"Your lover!" she exclaimed, her black eyes opening wide in amazement.

"Yes, my lover!" the angry, jealous girl repeated, firmly.

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Oh, don't you?" Avise sneered.

"Indeed I do not!" Frank replied, promptly. "I don't know who you are; I never saw you before, in all my life, and as for your lover, whoever he may be, I am sure I know nothing whatever about him."

"I have the advantage you see, for I know who you are and all about you."

"I can't see what possible advantage that can be to you or any one else," Frank retorted, contemptuously.

"Young woman, I have come to save you from a great peril!" declared Avise, abruptly.

"Yes?"

Frank did not feel at all interested; her subtle womanly instinct told her that this handsome girl was no friend to her, but rather a deadly foe, and she was not at all inclined to believe that she intended to serve her.

Avise, naturally quick-witted, saw at once that her words had not produced the impression intended—a fact that sensibly annoyed her.

She was somewhat surprised, too, at the appearance of the bouquet girl; she had expected to find

some little, simple creature, whom she could easily twine around her finger, but at the first glance at Fratik's pretty, resolute face, she saw that the task she had taken upon herself was likely to prove a difficult one, and that to achieve success she would need all her wits.

"A very great peril indeed threatens you, and although you are a stranger to me, though I took pains to find out all about you, I cannot bear to see you trifled with."

"Trifled with!" exclaimed the bouquet girl, her black eyes glittering, for the phrase strangely offended her.

"Yes, you are a simple, innocent girl, and I should be false to my sex if I permitted you to be blindly led astray without attempting to save you."

A quick, hot blush swept over Frank's pretty face, and angry tears came into her brilliant eyes. She was cut to the quick that the strange girl should dare to talk in such a manner to her.

"No, young woman," the burlesque queen continued, "I can't see you walk blindly into the gulf without stretching out my hand to save you; you shall not be sacrificed if I can help it."

"What do you mean by talking in this way to me?" Frank cried, indignantly. "What have I ever done that you should dare to talk so?"

"Oh, yes, that is always the way!" sneered Avise: "get angry with a friend who is trying to keep you from making a fool of yourself. You poor, silly thing! You are on the brink of ruin, and yet you despise the hand outstretched to save you."

"Oh, I can take care of myself, thank you!" the girl cried, indignantly.

"Yes, that is what every one thinks until it is too late," retorted the actress. "I came as a friend to warn you, but I perceive already that I shall only have my labor for my pains, for you do not believe me."

"Whence comes the danger?"

"From your own silly self!" Avise cried, harshly. "You are not an ugly girl, but the little beauty you possess will be your ruin. You think that this man means honestly by you, but I tell you, girl, that he is deceiving you, and some day he will tire of your company and then forsake you as he has forsaken better women than you are."

"You are a bold, forward creature, to dare to say this to me!" Frank cried, heatedly; "and of what man do you speak?"

"Oh, you know well enough," the blonde responded, with bitter accent. "I mean the man who has just left you—this actor, Ronald Craige. He is your lover, is he not?"

"By what right do you ask the question? What does it matter to you whether Mr. Craige is my lover or not?" Frank demanded, with burning cheeks and flashing eyes.

"Oh, not much; if I were like the majority of the girls of to-day, perhaps I shouldn't trouble my head about it at all, only that he is going to be my husband one of these days."

"Your husband!"

For a moment the heart of the bouquet girl seemed to stand still, and all around her reeled; the very air became murky.

It was only for a moment, though, and then the bold, brave heart of the girl asserted its wonted sway.

Avise had watched the effect produced by her words with a jealous, scornful smile.

One truth she had satisfied herself about—whether Ronald Craige cared for the girl or not, she cared for him. "She shall give him up, though!" the queen muttered, under her breath.

"Ronald Craige is to be your husband?" Frank asked, in a tone which plainly expressed her doubt, after she had recovered from the effects of the shock produced by the intelligence.

"Yes, and that is the reason why I take the trouble to seek you out and warn you against the dangerous path which you are treading, and which can only lead you to destruction. I love the man, and therefore I pardon him these tricks; you are not the first girl that he has trifled with, but I made up my mind to save you if I could, for I'm getting tired of having miserable, heart-broken girls come crying to me with their stories of how they have been treated by him. Of course you think that it is a great thing for this man to take a fancy to you; you are only a poor girl; you sell bouquets for a living, and I suppose you just about starve from one year to another; you have neither mother nor father; without any relatives, too, if I am rightly informed; no soul in the world to whom you can apply for counsel; there is no brother's friendly hand to prevent you from going to destruction. In your helpless situation the attentions of such a man as Ronald Craige must seem like a bit of heaven brought down to earth for your especial benefit. He is a gentleman, makes plenty of money, so you naturally think, because he dresses well and doesn't seem to have to work hard, although, if the truth were known, you would discover that he gets just enough to keep him alive, and that is all. It would be madness for him to marry a poor girl, and he knows that as well as any one. I suppose that this is a terrible blow to you, but I feel sorry for you and will help you, for I am rich and don't grudge the money. Come right away with me; don't say any thing to anybody, but come; I'll give you money enough to keep you for a year and hide you away somewhere, so that this man will never be able to find you—"

Frank drew herself up proudly, and stopped the speech of the other with a gesture of disdain.

"Oh, no, I understand your plan!" she cried; "it must be a fair fight between us. If you can win him from me you are welcome, but I defy you to do it!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WORLD'S OPINION.

With angry eyes the two girls looked upon each other, the blonde queen flaming with rage at the defiance of the bouquet girl, and the humble flower-seller indignant that such a scheme should be tried upon her.

"Foolish thing! you will not be warned?" the actress cried, almost beside herself with passion.

"And do you think that you can make me believe that you have taken all this trouble simply to do an act of *kindness*?" Frank exclaimed, contemptuously.

"What other motive, then?"

"I am your rival, and, despairing of succeeding in your designs by fair means, you would use foul. If you can succeed in getting me out of the way, then you think you can win the man whom you fancy, but I defy you to do it!"

"You my rival!" cried Avise, in supreme contempt; "and in what are you to rival me?"

"And who are you?" Frank retorted. "You are dressed well enough, but fine feathers don't always make fine birds!"

"I am rich enough to give Ronald Craige everything that he can possibly want in this world!" Avise cried, passionately; "and you, low, silly street-girl, you shall not come between us!"

"You haven't answered my question yet!" Frank exclaimed, her eyes flashing, and the rich, warm blood flooding her cheeks, all the temper within her frame roused at the insulting words of the other. "Who are you? You say that you have plenty of money, and from the richness of your dress one might think so, but *who are you*, and how did you get your money that you boast of so loudly? I am only a poor girl, but I am a lady, I trust, and I know how to behave myself in any society. I have never done anything in all my life that I have cause to be ashamed of. I get my living by selling flowers in the streets, but I defy any one to say a word against me, for I have always been a good girl. Mr. Craige knows all about me, and he is not a man to be easily deceived. You have money and I have none, but I am a lady and you are not!"

"Why, you insolent little wretch!" Avise cried, in a rage, "I've half a mind to slap your face!"

"And why don't you do it?" Frank cried, undauntedly. "That would most surely prove you to be a perfect lady in every respect. But I know who you are, well enough!" she added, in indignant contempt, "and how you get the money that you boast of. I've seen your pictures very often in the windows; you are one of the English blondes—the painted, hair-dyed women who exhibit themselves upon the stage, and expose their persons in the most shameful way! I am only a poor girl, but all the money in the world couldn't hire *me* to do it! You speak as if there were a great difference between us, and you are right—there is! I have never done anything in all my life that in after years need to call the blush of shame to my cheeks when reminded of it; but you, when you get to be a wife and a mother, won't you be ashamed when some stranger recognizes you, and remarks, perhaps in the very presence of your grown-up sons and daughters, 'Oh, yes, that Miss—whatever your name is—' I saw her in the burlesque once; she was not very clever, but she had fine limbs, and was not afraid to display them!'"

Avise recoiled as if she had received a violent blow in the face. "Born to the stage, almost, as it were, and brought up to it, never before in all her life had the opinion of the world at large concerning the actress and her vocation been so forcibly presented to her.

It was the old cry, dating from the time of crop-eared Cromwell and his fierce Puritans, "Beware the stage! there is contagion in it!"

We call it bigotry to-day; but the feeling exists, and almost as strong as ever. The actor is still the mountebank—the vagabond—in the opinion of nine-tenths of the world, varnish the matter over as you may.

And Avise, shrewd, keen-witted girl, realized that the voice of the world at large spoke in the angry tones of the bouquet girl. The actress was brave enough, but well knew that she could not hope to take up arms against the opinion of the world.

But even as she shrank aghast when the angry girl hurled at her the old-time jeer, one consoling thought flashed into her mind.

"But Ronald Craige is also an actor," she exclaimed; "he will not be ruled by this stupid, old-fashioned cant!"

"Question him and see!" Frank replied, quickly. "He will tell you the truth, for, to save his life, he would not condescend to falsehood! You will find that he both hates and despises the stage; the dream that lured him to it is over, and he anxiously waits for the chance to escape from the theater never to return!"

So far the bouquet girl had had the best of the interview, and Avise was keen enough to perceive that she had gained nothing by seeking the meeting. It was plain that the poor girl, whom she despised as a rival, and yet feared, was neither to be bought nor to be bullied.

The actress drew her cloak around her; she saw that the sooner she terminated the interview now the better.

"You will not be warned?" she said.

"Not by you!" Frank retorted, scornfully.

"Some day, when you wake to shame and misery, you will be apt to remember my words to-night, and then you will be sorry enough that you did not heed me."

"When that time comes, perhaps I shall!"

"It will come, and through this man!"

"When it does, I will believe it!"

"For the last time I make you the offer," Avise said, still stubborn in her purpose, although her better judgment told her that she was but wasting time and breath. "I will take you away from here, send you to some distant city, and provide for your support for a whole year, and in that time you can surely learn some trade by means of which you can get a comfortable living. You are mad to refuse such a chance!"

"But I do refuse it, though!" the flower-girl exclaimed, spiritedly. "I fully understand why you make the offer; you simply want to get me out of the way. I am not simple enough to fall into the trap."

"Reflect! I shall not make the offer again!"

"You might make it a hundred times and still receive only the one answer!"

Avise gazed at the flower-girl for a moment, her face flaming anger, but Frank met the look undauntedly. A brave heart had the bouquet girl, and she was not to be frightened by a look.

"Look well to yourself, young lady," the actress exclaimed in a bitter tone; "for after this night you will have a remorseless enemy in me! I would be your friend, but since you will not have it so, you must take the consequences."

"I care neither for your friendship nor your enemy," Frank answered, carelessly. "I do not wish the one nor fear the other."

"I shall make trouble for you!" the actress cried, menacingly, turning to depart.

"Take care that you do not get into trouble yourself!" the bouquet girl retorted.

"You shall not have Ronald Craige if it costs me five thousand dollars to separate him from you!" the blonde queen averred, hoarsely, all the evil passions in her nature roused by the failure of her plan.

The bouquet girl laughed; in her mind were thoughts of the fortune of half a million of dollars which now seemed pretty certain to come to her. With that sum at her disposal she could easily laugh to scorn the malice of this bleached-haired actress.

"You shall not take him from me if it costs me ten times five thousand!" Frank replied.

Avise stared at her rival for a moment, but she thought it only an idle boast.

"We shall see," she said, and then hurried away, while Frank entered the house.

And then from the recesses of the doorway of the next house came the tall, dark figure of a man, and with noiseless steps he followed after the blonde burlesque queen.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ASTOUNDING STATEMENT.

The chief of the Modocs sat in his office. Captain Jack felt entirely at ease with himself and all the world, for thus far his plans had progressed splendidly. Already, "in my mind's eye, Horatio," he had the fingering of the half a million of dollars left by the old confectioner. All was smooth sailing; he saw no rock ahead, no frowning line of breakers giving timely warning of the dangerous reef beneath. He had carefully prepared the papers necessary to prove the identity of the long-lost heir; had even made a list of the witnesses likely to be of use, and, as he glanced over the names, a satisfied smile played over his expressive face.

"Tip-top ones, all of them," he murmured. "Not a suspicious character among the lot likely to give the thing away!" The lawyer dipped into the slang of the streets once in a while. "It will be as nice and clear a case as I ever had the handling of; every point is covered; not a single weak place in all the testimony from the birth of the child up to the present time. It's a confounded shame that I have got to give Taxwill such a share of the swag, but I knew that he was too precious sharp not to suspect my little game if I attempted to run the thing through without him. But, as it is now, the scheme must go through. Both of the executors being satisfied in regard to the identity of the heir—for Dodson is as simple as a child and will believe anything we tell him—why, there is no one to contest the case, for, legally, I shall make it so strong that the proper officers will pass it at once."

And then the wily lawyer fell into a deep train of thought.

"A quarter of the sum only to me for all my trouble," he muttered at last, and then he shook his head in a manner which plainly betrayed that he was not at all satisfied. "It is not enough! Taxwill gets the same amount merely for shutting his eyes and letting the matter go through without opposition. I must have more, but how?" The lawyer closed his eyes reflectively for a moment, a fashion he had when engaged in studying out some abstruse puzzle.

"I have it!" he cried, suddenly unclosing his eyes, and bringing down his much-bejeweled hand with a vigorous slap upon his knee. "First, to get everything in proper order and then make propositions to the girl. Wait until the bright vista opens fairly before her and the moment arrives when my hand can toss the half a million into her lap, or else tumble her back to the gutter from whence she sprung, then I'll talk to her. She will accept, sure! Indeed, she would be mad to refuse! It's something of a sacrifice for me," and the lawyer surveyed with great complacency his handsome face and figure in the glass, "but for the sake of the money I'll swallow the pill. After a time, and I get things fairly in my hands, if the dose gets too strong—why, I can easily get rid of it."

At this point the meditations of the lawyer were suddenly interrupted.

There were two ground-glass doors to the office, one at each end of the room. The one nearest the stairs bearing the sign, "Leipper and Leipper," and

the other was ornamented with the inscription of "Benard and Britman, Counselors and Attorneys at law." Captain Jack was not only "Leipper and Leipper," but he was also "Benard and Britman." It was handy, sometimes, in particularly ugly cases, to have *nom de plumes*, especially if the affairs happened to get into the newspapers, as they sometimes did.

The door usually used by visitors, being the one nearest the stairs, although furthest from the elevator, opened suddenly and a man stuck his head into the apartment—a peculiar head, surmounted by a well-worn felt hat, Alpine style, the pattern so much affected by foreigners of uncertain habits; the face, thin, dark, hawk-like.

The man nodded, grinned, displaying long, pointed, white teeth, animal in their shape; then he advanced into the room, first closing the door carefully behind him, and moving with soft and stealthy tread.

Captain Jack took the man's measure at once; he knew the class so well—the broken-down foreigner, teacher, dancing-master, etc., always of noble birth, always very dignified and gentlemanly, always in want of a small sum—"Just a temporary loan, until the delayed remittance"—which, somehow, is always delayed—"arrives."

"Pardon me," exclaimed the man, drawing himself up and executing a stately bow; "if I do not a mistake make, I have ze honor to address ze famous Leipper and Leipper, ze magnificent lawyer."

The man spoke with a strong Italian accent, and the lawyer, an excellent judge of character, looking him carelessly in the face, instantly came to the conclusion that he was as evil-looking a rascal as he had encountered for many a long day.

"Yes, that's my name; what do you want?" the captain asked, not over-politely. No client this seedy Italian, but a nuisance to be abated as soon as possible.

"Ah! I was sure of it, ze moment my eyes fall on your face they did! Sare, I am proud to your acquaintance make." And again the stranger bowed.

"Yes, yes; but what do you want?" the lawyer demanded, abruptly, in no humor to be amused by any fooling, no matter how grotesque.

"You will a-pardon me if a chair I take," the man said, sweetly, never taking the slightest notice of the repelling manner of the lawyer, and then, without more ado, he helped himself to one of the cushioned arm-chairs, sat down in it, extended his legs, crossed them comfortably, removed his hat, placed it carefully upon another chair that stood near by, ran his long, tawny, talon-like fingers through his scanty black locks, which curled in crispy little tangles all over his head; then he fixed his glittering, uncertain, snake-like eyes upon the face of the astonished Captain Jack, who mentally set the stranger down as being the coolest rascal he had ever come in contact with. And this was saying a great deal, when we consider what a vast number of scoundrels the divorce lawyer had had business with since he had pursued the devious path which, to the pettifogger, brings money and notoriety.

"Now, we will a-speak on business," the stranger continued, after he had got comfortably settled. "You are Leipper and Leipper? Yes, goot! You are ze man I seek. You are ze lawyer who drew out ze will of Lorenzo Vendotena?"

Captain Jack stared in astonishment; it was not often that the cool and cautious lawyer was surprised, but he certainly was this time.

The stranger stuck out his tawny left hand, the open palm upward, and then with the forefinger of the other hand he proceeded to mark time, as it were, by tapping the palm gently with the end of the finger as he proceeded:

"You are ze lawyer! It is not necessary for you to a-speak, for I read ze truth in your expressive face. You are ze lawyer who drew out ze last will and testament of Lorenzo Vendotena. He a-died; ze will lives; it is goot! in that will is a half a million of dollars, and that half a million of dollars is left to ze granddaughter of ze old man, Francesca, child of Antonio, son of Vendotena. Am I not a-right, ha?"

"Yes; what you have stated is quite correct," Leipper replied, unable for the life of him to guess what the fellow was driving at. He was surprised that he knew any thing at all about the will; still, as the particulars had been published in the daily journals, right after the old man's death, there was nothing wonderful about the facts being known; only it was odd that a stranger who could not have any possible interest in the matter, should trouble his head about the affair at all.

"Vendotena to his fathers go some long time now, hey? and you look high, low, up and down ze earth, and nowhere can you find ze heir. Tranquillize your mind, my goot friend, and I bring her to you," the Italian exclaimed, with stately dignity.

"The deuce you do!" Captain Jack exclaimed, rather startled by the speech.

The Italian smiled, rapped his right forefinger thrice in the open palm of his other hand.

"Aha! behold in me a man who always keeps his words. What I say I do, diavolo! ten thousand devils in my path would not turn me from ze way one leetle inch; that is ze man I am! You behold me!" and the Italian leaned back in his chair as if to invite the inspection.

The lawyer was a little mystified; as yet he had not penetrated the game of the other.

"Excuse the question, but what reason have you to take any interest in this Vendotena affair, at all?" Leipper questioned.

In a single bound the man was on his feet, gesticulating wildly.

"Can you not a-guess? Look! behold!" he

cried. "I am ze farder of ze heir—I am Antonio Vendotena!"

CHAPTER XX.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

THE murder was out now, and Captain Jack saw at once what the man was up to.

"Oho! you are Antonio Vendotena, eh?"

"I am my farder's son!" cried the Italian, quickly; "can you not a-see it in my face? When you a-look at me does not Lorenzo Vendotena rise before you?"

The lawyer favored the man with a searching glance, and the Italian, folding his arms across his breast, drew himself up with dignity, as if to invite the inspection.

"Well, you do look something like the old man," Leipper admitted, carelessly, as if the resemblance was a matter of small moment.

"Aha! you do not doubt that I am my farder's son?" cried the Italian, in triumph.

"Oh, small doubt of that!"

"And that my farder was Lorenzo Vendotena?"

"Well, as to that, I am not so sure."

"And yet you admit ze resemblance, sare?"

"Oh, you Italians all look like one another; there's a sort of family resemblance between all of you," the lawyer replied, carelessly.

The man was disappointed and he plainly betrayed it in the restless glances of his sunken eyes. He had expected to produce a great impression when he had proclaimed himself to be the almost forgotten Antonio, who had been lost to sight for so many years, but the lawyer didn't seem to heed the matter at all.

"You doubt, eh, sare? You do not think that I am Antonio Vendotena?"

"Well, the fact is, old fellow, I don't trouble my head about the matter at all," Captain Jack replied, in the most matter-of-fact tone. "I am not at all interested."

"But you have a-charge of the estate—of the half a million of dollars!" the Italian cried, anxiously.

"No, not exactly; the executors have charge of the estate, but I am their legal adviser though."

"Then why are you not interested in me?" the man queried. "Understand I can not."

"Simply because you are not at all interested in the matter, even if you are Antonio Vendotena, and in regard to that fact I have considerable doubt, although the matter doesn't possess interest enough for me to trouble my head about it, one way or the other. If you are Antonio Vendotena you know the terms of the will well enough, and must certainly understand that you can have no possible interest in this half million of dollars."

"My child—she is under age—I am her legal guardian; you comprehend, eh?" and the eyes of the man sparkled as he spoke; he thought the point a strong one.

"Oh, no, she isn't!" the lawyer exclaimed. "She is eighteen, and considering that you deserted her when she was an infant this is rather late in the day to come forward and claim a father's rights; there isn't a court in the country that would admit your claim."

"Let us talk togedder!" said the Italian, soothingly, and with an expression of great cunning written upon his face; then he resumed his chair and pulled it up close to the lawyer.

"To me listen awhile," he continued; "you are a man of ze world, goot! So am I! Yesterday I was not born, you comprehend? Goot! You have no interest in me, but in my child, you have much interest—that is true, hey?"

The lawyer nodded.

"Goot! Oh, we shall understand each other; that child—my dear daughter, I will find her for you, you comprehend?"

Again the lawyer nodded; Captain Jack fully believed in the truth of the old adage, "give a dog rope enough and he will hang himself," and he wasn't the man to interrupt the Italian in the development of his plans.

"What better witness to prove the identity of ze child can you have than ze loving farder, eh?"

"Yes, but suppose I have found the heir already?"

"So much ze better!" cried the adventurer, with a true Latin shrug of the shoulders; "that will save me trouble."

"And you can identify the heir I present without any trouble, eh?"

"What can deceive a farder's eyes? Diavolo! I should pick my child out of ten thousand!"

"Even if you had never seen her before, provided that you were told in advance which was the right one, eh?" exclaimed Captain Jack, laughing.

The Italian grinned and winked mysteriously. In his heart he was delighted; he fancied that he was about to make his point, after all, but he little knew the cruel nature of this Modoc of the law who delighted, tiger-like, to play with his victims before administering the death-stroke.

"Aha! did I not a-tell you that we should understand each other?" the foreigner cried, highly delighted.

"Of course for such a service you expect nothing?"

"Am I not human? Is a farder's feelings worth nothing?" the Italian demanded.

"About how much?"

"Oh, I will be moderate—to grasp is not my nature—say one hundred thousand dollars!"

The lawyer indulged in a prolonged whistle.

"Aha! you t'ink it too much, eh?" the man cried, anxiously. "Consider a farder's feelings! By rights it should all be mine."

"Oh, no, you misunderstand me," the lawyer explained, not a shadow of a smile upon his face. "I was amazed at the smallness of your offer."

"Am I not a reasonable man? You accept, eh?" He was anxious.

"Well, I don't know about that."

"Aha! cried the Italian, starting to his feet again in the peculiar jerk, manner which seemed so natural to him. "If you refuse you turn me from a friend into a foe. I will appear in the a-court; I will say behold in me, Antonio Vendotena, the farder of ze heir! Zis girl—bah! she is one grand impostor; I know her not; she is not my child! You lose your case, you comprehend?"

"Yes, if your oath is believed," replied the lawyer, coolly. "But, how do you know I haven't got the heir? how do you know that I can't back up her claim with proofs so strong that even your declaration couldn't shake them, admitting that you are the man you claim to be?"

The Italian laughed—a low, "fiendish" laugh such as the representative of the Evil One in the opera generally indulges in—and then he bounced down into the chair again, and as he spoke gesticulated wildly with his skinny fore-finger.

"I am not a child, Signor Lawyer!" he cried, with true Southern vehemence. "Bah! I am a man well in years! Some time in this world have I lived and many things have I seen. I comprehend your leetle plan; it is great! it is colossal! but without me it will not work. I know ze leetle girl that you have a pick out for ze heir; she live a-Baxter street; black eyes, black hairs; they do a-curl like mine, but it will not do! No, no! ze plan will not work without me!"

The lawyer was considerably astonished at the extent of the man's information and began to have a little better opinion of his abilities than he had entertained, but he resolved to learn all the stranger knew.

"Why won't it work?" he questioned.

Again the mocking, fiend-like merriment.

"Aha! you have colossal ideas—grand, superb! but without me worth nothing! I know how you plan as well as if I walk a-with you. Half a million of dollars! it is a large sum! You advertise for ze heir—she come not; upon ze subject you muse; 'where is she? If she a-live why she no come? Then ze idea arrived; you see zis leetle girl; she do a-look like ze mother; there is a strong resemblance; she is an orphan, no farder or modder; she will answer; I present her; say 'Behold, ladies and gentlemans! this is ze heir to ze half a million of dollars!' you give her small sum, take all ze rest yourself! Aha! it is grand! but you did not a-count on ze farder! Behold, I come! I say, 'Ladies and gentlemans, zis is not a-my child!' your house of cards is upset! in ze ruins you are buried!"

"Ah, but what proof have you got that she is not the heir?"

The Italian laughed; he felt that he was getting the best of it.

"Oho! when you play with ze cards, do you ask the man who plays with you, 'Be so kind as to show me your hand, signor?'" he cried.

"No, but when he claims that the game is his, before I give up the stakes I make him show his cards!"

"Humph! so strong am I, I show my hand before I play!" the Italian replied contemptuously. "I will tell you why ze leetle flower girl is not Francesca Vendotena. Look at my hair; it is black, so is hers; but she is not a-my child! Oh, no! You finds ze nurse—ze doctair—all that knew my baby girl, and they will tell you that ze hair was light—light as beaten gold!"

The door at the further end of the room—Benard and Britman's door—opening suddenly interrupted the conversation. Both of the men turned, and there, framed in the doorway, was the girl who like a specter had appeared to the lawyer in the entryway of the old tenement house.

An appalling cry came from the lips of the Italian.

"Saints in heaven! It is Decetra!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXI.

COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING.

THOROUGHLY astonished were the two men at the unexpected appearance of the girl in the doorway, and she, on her part, appeared to be surprised.

The Italian, at the first glance, had detected the wonderful resemblance which she bore to the dead Decetra Limowell, the country girl, who had wedded in secret Antonio Vendotena, and Captain Jack, while perceiving also the wonderful resemblance which the face bore to the picture of the mother of the heiress, now in his possession, at the same time was forcibly struck with the likeness which the face bore to the features of another woman, now suddenly recalled to his memory.

Almost involuntarily the words had burst from the lips of the Italian:

"Saints in heaven! it is Decetra!"

The exclamation had seemed to wake the stranger from the stupor into which she had fallen upon beholding the two men. It was quite evident that neither one was a stranger to her.

Quickly she acted; she slammed the door to instantly, but with a common impulse the two men rushed forward toward it. And as they extended their hands to open it they heard the key without, which happened to have been carelessly left on the outside of the door, turn in the lock. The girl, with rare presence of mind, had thus checked pursuit.

"The other door!" the lawyer exclaimed.

They hurried to it, opened it, and rushed out into the entry. No one was there! The woman had disappeared!

"Diavolo! she has been too quick for us!" the Italian cried; "but we can overtake her on the stairs."

"More likely to have taken the elevator!" Captain Jack replied; "she could not possibly have got out

of sight so soon if she had gone down the stairs!" And with the speech the lawyer rushed to the grated doorway, which afforded an entrance to that modern triumph of ingenuity known as the elevator.

Sure enough, the machine was rapidly descending; already it was at least two stories below.

"Quick, to the stairs!" Captain Jack cried, "although there isn't much chance of overtaking her!"

The odds were decidedly against the success of the attempt, but they tried it nevertheless. Down the stairs they raced at break-neck speed, both men strangely excited. They halted not until they reached the main hall.

The elevator car was in its accustomed place waiting for customers, but no woman in sight.

The lawyer accosted the youth in charge of the car.

"A woman came down with you just now?"

"Yes," replied the boy, listlessly.

"A girl with a basket on her arm, light hair?"

"Yes, I s'pose so." The lad was so used to conveying a motley crowd of passengers up and down that he rarely troubled his head to look at them and note their personal appearance.

"Which way did she go?" demanded the lawyer, anxiously.

"Dunno," replied the boy.

It was plain that there was no information to be got out of him.

The lawyer took one look at the crowd surging by the door on Broadway, and fully realized how hopeless would be the attempt to pursue the mysterious woman, now that she had fairly escaped from the building.

"She has given us the slip."

"Diavolo! yes!" the Italian cried, with a grunt.

"Come up to the office again and we'll finish our talk, and, perhaps, come to an understanding."

The Italian nodded.

By the aid of the elevator, the two speedily resumed their former quarters.

"A mysterious affair!" the lawyer observed, thoughtfully. "The girl, or woman, whatever she is, evidently recognized us."

"And do you not know her?" the Italian asked, shrewdly.

"Well, I can't say that I do, or that I do not," Captain Jack replied, evasively. "The face is familiar to me, and yet it is not. It looks like the picture of Decetra Limowell, which I have, and also reminds me of another person."

"Connected with the Limowell family?"

"Oh, no." It was plain that the remembrance was not a pleasant one, that is, if one could judge from the expression upon the face of the lawyer.

"I told you that ze leetle girl, that you think is ze heir is not; behold! specter-like, zis one comes to confirm my words!" the Italian exclaimed in triumph.

The lawyer favored his visitor with a long, searching glance from under his bushy eyebrows.

The thought had suddenly occurred to the Modoc that perhaps this sudden appearance of the light-haired girl was all a cunningly arranged trick devised by the Italian, and so he determined to probe the matter to the bottom.

"Who do you think this girl is?" he asked, quietly.

"Ze heir!" replied the Italian, promptly. "It is Francesca Vendotena, my child! A farder's eyes cannot be deceived!"

"Well, that ends the little arrangement, then, that you were proposing," the lawyer observed. "Of course now you would not be willing to back up the claim of this other girl whom I believe to be the missing heir."

"Oh, what does it matter to me so long as I get ze money?" the Italian cried, with great frankness. "One girl or ze odder, it does not matter to me at all. You pay me ze hundred thousand dollars and I will swear that ze odder girl is my child; it is all ze same!"

"Your conscience doesn't trouble you much does it?"

"Conscience, bah!" exclaimed the Italian in lofty contempt. "What does your great poet say, 'Conscience! it is our coin, we live by parting with it, and he thrives best who has ze most to give.' Such a man am I!"

"This girl is evidently poor; she had a basket on her arm, a peddler," suggested the lawyer, slowly and reflectively.

"Oh, rest you a-tranquil; she will not trouble you!"

"Suppose I don't accept this offer of yours?" Captain Jack demanded abruptly. "Suppose I go ahead my own way without your aid?"

"Aha! then I shall be compelled, my noble friend, to block-ah ze wheels of your game!" was the Italian's menacing response.

"I don't see how you are going to do it."

"Aha! you want me to a-show you my hand again! Behold! I will do it; because it is so strong that you canot beat me, play as well as you may! Listen tranquil to me then! In ze court you produce ze girl. You say, 'Learned judge, behold this is Francesca Vendotena, ze daughter of Antonio Vendotena, ze heir to ze half a million of dollars.' Then in ze court I rise; I call aloud; I say, 'It is not so, most noble judge; deceive you this man he will. I speak; I say so; I, Antonio Vendotena, ze farder of ze heir! Most honorable judge, it is all one grand plot! Zis is a girl from ze gutter picked: to ze half a million of dollars she has no right. Ze heir, my child, is in New York; within ze last year have I seen her. Most noble judge, give me time I will find her!"

With outstretched hands suiting the action to the word the Italian had acted out the speech, just for all the world as if he had been in the legal arena.

Captain Jack watched him with a sarcastic smile. A scheme had entered his head by means of which he could easily defeat the Italian's plan, cunning as he thought himself.

"Well, what say you now, eh?" demanded the hawk-faced adventurer. "Come! is it not better to be friends with me, to have my aid than to fight with me? Will not ze voice of a farder touch ze heart of ze most noble court and melt it to tenderness, ha?"

"A hundred thousand dollars is a large sum."

"Not one penny less!" cried the Italian, violently. "Bah! it is moderate! One hundred thousand dollars out of half a million! It is a flee-bite!"

"I am not alone in this matter. I must consult another party—if you could say fifty thousand now—"

"No, no, no!" cried the adventurer, vehemently; "not a copper less! I will not have it!"

"Come here to-morrow, at this time, and I'll have the other party here; but the sum is too large—"

"Oh, let me a-talk to him; he will agree!" the Italian confidently protested.

A few more words of small import and the interview ended.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PRIVATE INQUIRY OFFICE.

On John street between Nassau and William in the great city of New York stands a modest-looking three-story brick house—a dwelling of ancient date erected in the days when trade centered around Bowling Green and the nabobs of the town lived in John and the adjoining streets.

At that time the Bowery was a cow-walk, and the Collect Pond, where the Tombs is now situated, was pretty well out of town.

Naught but the heavy moldings that ornament the walls now remain to tell of the ancient glories of this once sumptuous abode.

Stores now occupy the first floors and the rooms above are rented out for offices.

Before the directory sign of No. 52, the house we have described, a female form was standing.

A plainly attired woman, but still very neatly dressed; a heavy vail concealed her features, yet, in spite of this half-disguise one could see that she was young and pretty, with great dark eyes and light yellow hair.

A miscellaneous lot of people occupied offices in No. 52. There were artists, wood-engravers, pocket-book manufacturers, stencil-plate makers, obscure publishers of still more obscure journals, and one modest tin sign bore the inscription:

"PRIVATE INQUIRY OFFICE."

"JEHIAL PENDALMOCK."

And upon this sign the eyes of the female rested.

"What is a private inquiry office?" we fancy we hear our reader remark.

The explanation is easy. The term is an imported one from bustling, crowded London, Britain's capital—a recent transplant, but one that bids fair to flourish among us, for the clime is a congenial one.

The Private Inquiry Office is simply a private detective under a more business-like name.

Many men occupy responsible positions in mercantile houses where vast opportunities for dishonesty exist; many bank officers and trusted officials of various important enterprises are liable to be led into temptation.

And when any man holding one of these important positions excites suspicion by his manner of living, or by any other form of extravagance and dishonesty, the employer at once applies to a Private Inquiry Office. For a certain sum, more or less as the case may be, a private detective is detailed to watch the suspected one day and night; and this vigilant watch soon detects whether the man is honest or not.

In delicate family matters, too, the Private Inquiry Office is invaluable, for many affairs are quietly settled, instead of causing utter ruin to all concerned by having them dragged into an open court.

The lady noted the number of the Private Inquiry Office and then proceeded up-stairs to the second story, where, in a small front room, the office was situated.

The lady knocked, was bidden to enter, and turning the handle of the door found herself in the presence of Jehial Pendalmock, the chief of this semi-secret bureau.

The private detective was a short, thick-set man, with a bushy brown beard and a pleasant face, wherein shone a pair of shrewd gray eyes. He was well in years and possessed that peculiar manner which wins the good opinion of a stranger at a glance.

The room was plainly furnished, a stove, a desk, a sofa and three or four chairs.

The detective was perusing one of the afternoon journals, but rose at once when he perceived that his visitor was a lady and offered her a chair.

"You are the head of this office?" the lady asked, evidently a little embarrassed by the novelty of the situation.

"Yes, ma'am." The detective was quite accustomed to receive lady visitors. Many a jealous wife had sought his aid, anxious to detect and punish a recreant husband.

"I have a little business which I wish you to attend to for me; what are your terms?"

"It depends entirely upon the nature of the business, ma'am, and the trouble it gives me. My fees range all the way from five dollars per day upward, and my expenses besides."

The lady drew a legal-looking paper from her pocket and handed it to the detective.

"You perceive what that document is?"

"Yes, ma'am." The detective examined it at a

glance. "A decree of divorce, James Ronnells from Pauline Montgomery, got in an Iowa court, humph! one of those suspicious documents! It may be all right, and then again it may not be worth the paper it is written on." The detective then glanced at the indorsement upon the back. "Benarding and Britman. Oho! I know that party!"

"Are they a responsible firm?"

"Well, ma'am, to tell the honest truth, there is no such firm."

"No?"

"No such firm," the detective repeated, with a quiet laugh. "They have an office on Broadway, and they do a good deal of advertising in the newspapers. Perhaps you may have noticed their advertisements. 'Divorces procured without fail in any court and from any cause. No money required in advance.' That's the way they put out. Now, if I were a married man, and fancied that I had cause to be dissatisfied with my partner, and, attracted by their advertisement, should call upon Benarding and Britman, I should never be able to find them in. The fact is, ma'am, you see, I'm not the kind of client they want; but if some simple country farmer or mechanic should call, with an eye to business, a gentleman, elegantly dressed, and with plenty of diamonds, would receive the party, explain that the members of the firm were out just then, but that he could attend to the business in their absence. The client tells his story, the gentleman makes memorandums of the important points, assures the party that there is no doubt that the thing can be put through, explains that Benarding and Britman do not demand any fee in advance, but that there are certain legal expenses that must be met—Benarding and Britman will wait for their pay until the case is settled—and then the gentleman strikes the victim for ten, twenty, or thirty dollars, just according to what he thinks he will stand. The country man pays over the money and departs, thinking that the thing is going to be settled off-hand. In a month or two he gets a note, if he doesn't get anxious and call in the meantime, stating that there are some more legal expenses to be met, and that they must have twenty-five dollars more. Well, this sort of thing is repeated as long as the victim will stand it; and finally, when either the patience or money of the party is exhausted, just as the case may be, and he says that he can't advance any more money until the thing is settled, then, if the party has any good grounds for a divorce, they get it, and inform him that the decree is in their hands, and that when they receive a certain sum of money they will forward the document; but if the case is a lost one, and they can't get a legal divorce, even in some of those far Western States where the laws are loosely framed, they—if the party is poor, and they think they have got all the money he has—throw the matter up entirely, tell the man he has no grounds for a divorce, and wash their hands of the thing; but if he is still willing to pay, they get a bogus decree from some little trumpery court out in the Salt Lake region, perhaps—a paper of no legal value whatever. And now comes the point of the Benarding and Britman game. Suppose an indignant victim comes in to get his money back, he finds the same smooth-tongued gentleman who received it, but that party has entirely forgotten him, and knows absolutely nothing whatever about the matter. If he took the money, which he doubts, as he doesn't remember, he merely turned it over to Benarding and Britman, and they are the parties to be seen. Of course, they can't be found; and if the man goes to an honest lawyer and tells his story, he is recommended to let the matter go, as any legal recovery is impossible, costing more than it would come to."

"And what is the name of the person whom one would see calling upon this firm?"

"Jack Leipper, the shrewdest and most unscrupulous lawyer that there is to-day in New York."

"I wish to find out all about this James Ronnells—who he is, where he is now."

"Oh, that will be easy enough."

"And, furthermore, I wish information in regard to a child brought to the village of Long Branch by a colored woman, one Elizabeth Johnson, commonly called Brown Betty, about seventeen years ago."

The detective jotted down the name in his memorandum-book.

"What name did the child bear?"

"I do not know what the colored woman called the child, but the man who brought her up called her Frances Blakely."

Again the detective made an entry in his memorandum-book.

"Brown Betty lives on the road leading from Long Branch to Branchburg; any of the inhabitants there will be able to point out the house to you. You require money, I presume?"

"Well, a slight advance for expenses will be acceptable. I don't think that this will be a very costly job."

The lady counted out twenty dollars into the detective's hand, and then took her departure, first making an appointment for that day week.

Twenty minutes later the detective walked into Captain Jack's office.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AFTER INFORMATION.

CAPTAIN JACK was busy with his papers, but looked up as the detective entered.

The head of the Private Inquiry Office was well known to the lawyer, as he had had business dealings with him, but there was no love lost between the two, as the detective in two or three cases had succeeded in bothering the lawyer's plans considerably.

But Leipper always received either friend or foe

with a smiling face, and therefore he greeted the burly detective quite cordially.

"How are you? Help yourself to a chair. Warm, isn't it?"

"Yes, quite warm."

The detective seated himself comfortably in an arm-chair and prepared for action.

"What's up?" Captain Jack questioned.

He understood that this was no mere visit of ceremony, but that the detective had come on business.

"I want to get a little information from you."

"Certainly; happy to oblige you; what is it?" and the lawyer, wheeling around in his chair, faced the detective with a pleasant smile upon his handsome face.

The detective took out his memorandum-book in the peculiar, methodical way so natural to him, opened it and glanced at one of the pages.

"I want you to give me the correct address of Mr. James Ronnells."

The lawyer was playing carelessly with a little ivory paper-knife, but as the name reached his ears, with a single convulsive movement the strong hands snapped the fragile toy in twain.

The detective, with his nose down in the memorandum-book—he was rather short-sighted, or pretended to be, so his detractors said—apparently was not watching the face of the lawyer, but in reality not the slightest expression of the features escaped him.

And over the expressive face of the lawyer a look of blank astonishment had rapidly passed. It was but momentary, though; in a second he had recovered his composure.

"James Ronnells," he said, slowly and reflectively. "James Ronnells—I don't think that I know any one by that name."

"Quite sure?" Pendalmock asked in his quiet way; and the lawyer, well acquainted with the detective's manner, understood at once that Pendalmock knew that he was not speaking the truth.

"Well, yes; but I say!" exclaimed the lawyer, rapidly, "will you allow me to ask you a few questions?"

"Of course."

"Why do you wish to know anything about this James Ronnells? Do you 'want' him for anything?"

The cant saying of the detective officer when he lays the hand of power upon the shoulder of the criminal is, "You're wanted, my man!"

"Oh, no; nothing of that kind, at all," Pendalmock hastened to explain. "A party came to my office, left the name, and desired me to procure any information I could in regard to the party."

"And was my name mentioned in the matter?" asked Captain Jack, apparently very much astonished.

"Oh, no."

"Why, then, do you come to me in regard to the man?"

"Because I know that you know something about him," the detective answered, bluntly, much to the astonishment of the lawyer.

"Why, Pendalmock, you're a perfect jewel of a detective!" Captain Jack declared, forcing a laugh, but it was quite plain that the affair was far more likely calculated to give him matter for uneasiness than cause for merriment. "I suppose it is of no use for me to deny all knowledge of this man."

"Not the slightest use, Mr. Leipper, for I know you do know something about him, or rather that you did know something. I speak more correctly, perhaps, to use the past tense," the detective remarked, in his cool, quiet way.

A peculiar expression shot across the face of the lawyer; it did not escape the sharp eyes of the detective, but for the life of him he couldn't detect what caused it or what it purported. For once the keen wits of the acute blood hound-of-the-law were at fault.

"See, Pendalmock, you place me in a peculiar situation," he said, abruptly, and apparently with great frankness. "This man may be a client of mine, and how can I tell, if I give you his address—supposing I have it—that I shall not be doing him a mischief?"

The detective shook his head. It was a knotty point.

"Now I know you to be a man of your word," the lawyer continued, "and if you will give me a pledge that, if I am able to give you any information, it shall not result in mischief to him, why then I will overhaul my memory in regard to this Mr. James Ronnells."

Again Pendalmock shook his head.

"You can't give the pledge, eh?" and the lawyer appeared to be strangely interested, considering that he had at first denied all knowledge of the man.

"I can't give you the pledge with a free conscience, to be honest with you," the detective replied, "because I don't know anything about it."

"You don't?"

"No, honest! I haven't the remotest idea why the information is wanted."

"That's strange," the lawyer observed, contracting his bushy eyebrows.

A certain party came to my office, gave me the name of James Ronnells and desired me to find out all I could about him, and that's all I know about it."

The lawyer cast his eyes down to the floor and remained silent for a few moments, evidently in deep thought.

"I don't understand this matter, at all," he said at last, after quite a long pause. "I suppose it is of no use to ask who the person was?"

"To betray one of my patrons would ruin my business," the detective quietly rejoined.

"If Ronnells is the man I think he is, he would be apt to give a trifle to know who it is that is so anxious about him," Captain Jack suggested, carelessly.

Jehial understood the hint, but he was the soul of honor where a client was concerned, so he quietly shook his head.

"You can't see it?"

"Couldn't do it, you know," Pendalmock replied.

"Well, I can't give you any information about the party," Captain Jack announced in an off-hand, careless way, "except that I have a vague remembrance of such a man, and that I transacted some business for him; what it was I don't remember, but I don't think it amounted to much."

"You can't give the address, then?" and the detective rose as he spoke.

"No, but if I knew what he was wanted for—if the object of the inquiry was revealed to me, it is possible I might be able to obtain some information in regard to the matter."

"I'll see what the party says about it," and the detective retreated to the door.

"By the way!" cried the lawyer, abruptly, halting Pendalmock with his hand on the door-knob. "Supposing that you don't succeed in getting any information in regard to this Mr. Ronnells—and I greatly doubt your being able to obtain any—and you get through with the party who wishes to prosecute the search, I suppose you would have no objection to taking a retaining fee from me to find out why this party wants Mr. Ronnells?"

"Oh, no; not the least objection," the detective replied, readily. "When I get through with the party I am entirely at your service."

"All right; come round and let me know."

The detective nodded and departed.

"Well," he mused, descending the stairs slowly, "this affair looked all plain and straightforward, but it is quite evident, now, that it is going to give me some trouble. I never saw Leipper taken so by surprise before, for he is about as cool a hand as I know of, anywhere, but he snapped that paper-knife as though it was made of pasteboard. There's something beneath the surface in all this, and I am beginning to get interested. This Ronnells is a valuable client, or Leipper would never have betrayed so much interest in the matter. I wonder if the lady is the party from whom the divorce was obtained? He don't think I will be able to procure any information in regard to the party, eh?" and the detective laughed quietly to himself. "Well, well, we can tell that better after I have been at work on the case for a week or so. I must try what effect a five-dollar bill will have upon Mr. Leipper's office-boy; and these lads have sharp eyes and ears, sometimes."

The bloodhound was eager on the scent!

CHAPTER XXIV.

A COOL PROPOSAL.

AFTER parting with the Bouquet Girl Avise had hurried along, her blood at fever-heat; her plan had failed; she had been repulsed with scorn and contempt.

"The little beggar! to dare to bandy words with me!" she exclaimed, almost ready to cry with rage. "And, what can Craige possibly see in that miserable little creature to admire? A little sallow-face thing! and with impudence enough for a dozen! I ought to have slapped her face well, the little hussy!"

The Queen of the Blondes walked rapidly down Grand street toward Broadway.

Close behind her came the tall, dark man with stealthy tread, and as the enraged and baffled girl turned into New York's great artery, now dark and almost deserted, as it usually is at such an hour on Sunday evening, the man improved the opportunity to step forward and address her.

"Good-evening, mademoiselle," he said, and the strong foreign accent as well as the peculiar tone of the voice at once betrayed to the quick ears of the actress that it was the seedy foreigner who had sought an interview with her, a few days before, at her hotel.

Avise drew herself up in stately dignity and glanced quickly around her.

In truth a nervous woman would have been alarmed, for the street was dark and almost deserted; but women of the stage are not generally timid. Obliged from the nature of their vocation to return from the theater at a late hour, often unattended, they get used to the solitude of the midnight streets.

The Italian comprehended the meaning of the glance in an instant and hastened to reassure the lady.

"Alarm yourself do not!" he exclaimed. "Your humble slave, which am I, love ze very ground you walk over with your magnificent feet! Protect you I would with my life from all danger," and he bowed obsequiously as he concluded the speech.

"Well, sir, what do you want?" Avise demanded.

"To your hotel you will proceed now?" the Italian asked, with another low bow.

"Yes."

"Mademoiselle, permit your humble slave the distinguished honor of accompanying your steps to ze hotel."

"Thank you, but I don't desire any company," the actress replied, haughtily.

"Ah, mademoiselle, but I have something very important to say to you; as we walk along, my plans I can unfold; you comprehend, eh?"

"Oh, you're wasting your time, sir; you can have nothing to say to me that I care to hear!" was Avise's impatient response. She was in no mood to listen to what at some other time might have amused her. "If it is money that you are after spare your-

self the trouble of talking; here's a dollar for you; so get out!" The actress opened her purse and tendered a bank-note.

With a stately bow the Italian declined the gift, although it must be recorded that his eyes glared hungrily as he looked upon the bit of paper which represented a good dollar.

"No, mademoiselle, no; it is not your money I seek!" he returned, with dignity. "I do not come to beg. It is to do you a service that I seek you this night!"

The Italian had one strange peculiarity; sometimes he spoke extremely good English with hardly a trace of a foreign accent, and then again his discourse smacked strongly of the foreigner.

"You do me a service?" asked Avise, evidently doubtful of the man.

"Si, signora!" replied he, promptly. "Listen to a-me. Concealed in ze next doorway was I to-night; my ears did hear all that passed between you and that young woman."

The actress crimsoned for a moment from neck to temples, more through anger than from shame, though.

"Every word did I hear, and when that base child of ze gutter revile you, bright, beautiful star! ze blood boil in my veins! But, I can serve you. Be you pleased to walk along and I will explain."

Avise did so, more for the sake of getting rid of the fellow than from any thought that he could be of any service to her.

"Listen, be tranquil, and you will a-comprehend me," he began, marching along by the side of the tall, beautiful girl, and like a gigantic cat purring in her ear. "Zis girl! ah! she is an imp of Satan!" he cried, with an expression of well-assumed horror upon his face. "She has insnaed that noble young man, his wits are a-tangled up. I have heard many conversations between them. In that house I live; it is not grand—not like my palace by ze blue waters of Napoli, ah! but what can I do, crushed a-down by ze heel of iron fortune, you comprehend."

"Yes," Avise was burning with eagerness to hear of the interviews between the two.

"In his true heart he cares not for her," the Italian explained, and the words fell on ears quick to drink in the meaning, "but, she has entrapped him. He has given his word—oh! he is a noble young man! His word he would a-keep although the sky fall! But if she were away taken, he would be free; his word released, he would be your slave!"

Avise caught eagerly at the idea, and a hard, strange look came over her fair young face.

She was mad with love—fierce with love's passion, and to accomplish her desire few obstacles in this world were too great for her to surmount.

"Take her away—what do you mean?" the actress asked, in a low, hard voice, strangely harsh for her silver throat.

"Exactly what I say; in riddles I do not speak!" the Italian replied in the most matter-of-fact way. "Away she must be taken; the spell removed, ze noble young man will be all your own."

"You do not mean to kill her?" Avise asked in a whisper, her face growing deadly pale at the horrible idea.

"Oh, no, there is no need of that," the Italian replied, lightly. "Although, were there no other way, for your sake, my child, I would not hesitate for a moment. Bah! what is her miserable life compared to your happiness?"

"Oh, no; not, not that!" the actress cried with a shudder.

"Rest yourself tranquil, my child; ze matter can be easily arranged. Ze girl can be carried off. There is a friend of mine, a noble gentleman, although like myself he and hard fortune have shaken hand lately very hard, but he is a noble youth; of the best blood of fair Italy he comes; my friend—my brother, ze Colonel Anselmo del Frascati. Glance over your shoulder, signora, and you will behold him."

The actress did so, and beheld a fat, greasy and decidedly seedy Italian jogging along with downcast head about half a block behind them.

"You behold! a noble youth!" the Italian continued; "with love he does be consumed for that young girl; he hangs upon her footsteps and grows thin with sighs of love! It is heaven's mercy to bring them together. All I need is ze money for ze enterprise. We carry ze girl off! Bah! it is as easy as turning over your hand! In New York I know plenty of men—countrymen of mine—who will be glad to earn five dollars and never question what is the job. Ze street is lonely, ze hall very dark; we wait for her some night inside ze hall, and have a carriage a leetle way down ze street. When she come in ze entry we seize her; put ze leetle cloth with ze medicine to her nose, her senses swim and she faint. Then we carry her to ze carriage and we drive off, nice as can be. Ze bridegroom, my noble friend, ze colonel, is ready, ze priest waiting—I know a man who will perform ze ceremony and never trouble his head about questions, provided he is well paid for it. She become ze wife of my friend and her spell over your lover is broken."

It was in truth a diabolical plan, but so mad with passion was the willful blonde that she caught eagerly at the idea.

"But if she escapes afterward?" she asked.

"Will Mistair Craige want ze wife of another man, eh?" the Italian asked, with a fiendish grin.

A fearful fate indeed they had planned for the bouquet girl.

"How much money do you want?"

"A hundred dollars will be enough now; perhaps I shall not need any more."

Avise gave him the money at once.

"Anything to rid me of that girl!" she cried, in desperation.

CHAPTER XXV.

A LEAF FROM HISTORY.

By the time that the desperate, love-stricken actress and the reckless Italian adventurer had arrived at an understanding, they were pretty near to the hotel which the Queen of the Blondes honored with her presence.

With an imperious gesture Avise dismissed the adventurer.

"You need not accompany me further," she said; "we understand each other now. If you need more money come for it, and as an incentive to successful action I hereby promise you that within an hour after the marriage of this girl to your friend I will make you a present of five hundred dollars."

The girl was liberal; but what was money to her? She was making a thousand dollars a week and never dreamed that the time could come when her gains would be less.

"Oh, rely upon me, signora!" the Italian, replied, promptly. "Within a week, at the most, you shall rest tranquil. Believe me! I know what I a-speak."

Avise hurried on, leaving the adventurer standing upon the corner, waiting for his seedy friend to come up.

A smile of satisfaction played around the thin lips of the Italian as he watched the graceful figure of the actress hurrying along in the gloom.

"She is superb!" he murmured. "Her mother was a grand woman, but she no hold a candle to zis girl! I have made my point! Zis lawyer, bah! imbecile! he wants time to reflect! Oh, no! I understand him perfect. I rest tranquil. He wants time to see if he cannot beat me in some way. Let him go on; I am prepared. In strategy I am Napoleonic!"

The approach of the fat Italian cut short the meditations of the scheming rogue.

"Aha! well?" grunted the noble colonel, his little eyes gazing anxiously after the actress.

"My friend, I have succeeded!" the adventurer responded to the interrogation. "Fifty dollars have I received from her, and when you are married to ze girl I am to have a hundred more."

The fat rogue shook his head.

"It is not enough, I am afraid."

"Why not enough? It is a great plenty."

"We shall need a coach to carry her off; a man to drive—"

"Oh, no!" the tall Italian cried, quickly. "You must drive ze coach. Diavolo! do we need a dozen? No; you will drive ze coach, I will attend to ze girl. We two will be all; there is nothing to pay but for ze coach."

The other grunted assent.

"To-morrow I am to see ze lawyer again; after ze interview is over, I can tell when to strike ze blow. If I do not a-miss my guess ze time will soon come. We will get home now, allons."

And chatting together, coolly arranging the details of the plan as if the carrying off of a young and helpless girl was a common, everyday affair, the two adventurers proceeded down Broadway.

So busy were they in their conversation, so intent upon the scheme which was, if successful, to bring enormous wealth to them, that neither of the two noticed, in passing, a couple of swarthy-faced, poorly-dressed men standing, engaged in conversation, in a doorway.

The men were partly concealed in the shadow of the doorway, not intentionally seeking to avoid conversation though, but had merely stepped aside from the general promenade to enjoy their conversation without interruption.

The two conspirators, swaggering along in the full glare of the street lights, the tall exile busily engaged with outstretched finger in explaining to the other how certain they were of success in the scheme to forever imbib a young girl's life, could hardly help attracting the notice of the two men in the door's shadow.

And as the brace of rascals passed, a single sentence coming from the lips of the tall adventurer fell distinctly upon the ears of the two within the doorway.

"Diavolo! I tell you we cannot fail! the idea is grand! it is Napoleonic! A half a million of dollars! aha! we can return to Italy and live like princes!" and the two passed on; the listeners heard no more.

But one of them had heard quite enough. With a violent movement he grasped the other by the arm.

"Oh, saints in heaven! fortune is good to me at last!" he cried.

The speaker was a stout, brawny fellow, well on in years, as his grizzled beard and the sprinkling of silver hairs among his otherwise black and curling locks betrayed. His companion was younger and more slender.

"What is the matter, Pietro?" the second man asked, astonished at the manner and words of the other. Both men spoke in Italian, and from the purity of their accent, it was plain they were men of education.

"That man!" he cried, with angry gesture, but in suppressed tones, pointing after the brace of plotting knaves.

"Which one?"

"The tall one—the fiend in face and heart!"

"Well, what of him?"

"For seventeen years have I sought him—the miserable villain—but all in vain!"

"Is that possible?" the other cried, in amazement.

"Yes; seventeen years ago, in Naples, he ruined all my life. It's a long story and a bitter one, Tomaso, my friend!" and the speaker ground his teeth in rage.

"Why, Pietro, I never heard you speak of this matter before."

"The Vilarni are a silent race; they bear and suf-

fer without a cry. You know that I was a patriot at home and suffered for my opinions."

"Yes."

"That man is the cause of all!"

"What, Castiglioni?"

"Aha! you know him!" the swarthy Neapolitan cried, eagerly.

"Yes, he lodges in the same house with me."

"Aha! no need to track him to-night, then, since I know where to find him to-morrow. And how calls he himself?"

"Phillipe de Castiglione. And he once wronged you?"

"Yes, most foully!" the other replied, bitterly; "and by the blood of all the saints, I swear, my vengeance shall be as fearful and as complete as the ruin which he wrought!"

"You excite my curiosity; explain."

"You know the brotherhood in the old land to which we both belonged?"

"The Carbonari? yes!"

"You were at Milan, I at Naples; you remember how, seventeen years ago, all Italy, that still felt the weight of the tyrant's foot, was ripening to revolt. In Naples our brotherhood was very strong.

At that time I was divided between two passions—a desire to free my native land and love for a fair girl, the daughter of a goldsmith whose shop was in the Grand Square. The goldsmith himself a worthy man, Alphonso Cellini, was one of the chiefs of our brotherhood; his daughter looked with favor on me, and all seemed bright and fair. Then to Naples came a messenger from the Grand Circle of our brotherhood at Paris; he found shelter in Cellini's house; he was a tall, dashy fellow, a man of wealth, it was said, who, for the sake of freeing Italy, had resolved to sacrifice every thing. Somehow I took a dislike to the man, at first sight, and never trusted him; but Cellini, honest soul, always accepted men at their own estimate, and his daughter, too, my heart's idol, seemed strangely interested in this fluent stranger. I suspected that he was trying to displace me, but I resolved to bide my time, although ever on my guard against a blow from the malice of this French Italian, for I could plainly see that he hated me. The blow came at last, but in a different manner from what I had expected. There was a traitor in our brotherhood, and we were all denounced to the police—the goldsmith alone excepted. For six long months I languished in a dungeon, a miserable hole not fit even for a dog; then came the hour when the powers of Europe bade Italy rise and take its place once again among the nations of the earth. From my dark cell I came forth into the world. I found that Cellini was dead, his daughter had married the stranger; he had robbed her of the wealth left by her father and had deserted her. I found her dying of a broken heart, and with her latest breath she revealed to me that the traitor who had betrayed us was her husband—this man who has just

CHAPTER XXVI.

ENTRAPPED.

PROMPTLY on the day appointed the Italian walked down Broadway to the lawyer's office. A peculiar look of distrust was upon his dark face; he was not at all easy in his mind; he did not put complete confidence in the lawyer and was very much inclined to think that Captain Jack would overreach him if he possibly could.

"But he will not do it, diavolo! no!" was the Italian's fierce thought. "I am not a child to be fooled with! No! And he shall discover that if he tries it. Bah! the game is in my hands; nothing can prevent me from winning, no power above, below or anywhere!"

But, despite this, it was plain the adventurer felt anything but confident. In his heart he was surely afraid the wily lawyer would be able to devise some plan to overreach him, and though he racked his brain to its utmost, he could not see how the thing could be done.

Standing just within the entrance of the palatial pile, where Leipper's office was situated, he rapidly, in his mind, scanned the battle-ground.

"If he accepts, good! I come forward and swear to the identity of the child. If he refuse, good again, for then am I left free to follow my own devices. Against my testimony she can get nothing; will he dare to try that? Bah! no! he would be one great fool for the sake of the leetle one hundred thousand dollars to attempt to defy me. Diavolo! I cannot see one weak point in the whole case. Oh, no! he will not dare! he will yield! he will say, politely, 'My dear friend, rest tranquil! here is the one hundred thousand dollars; we want your testimony; not for ten times one hundred thousand dollars will we make an enemy of yon! The matter is settled!'

With a grand wave of his hand, at this happy conclusion, he stepped into the elevator and was rapidly borne skyward; and with a jaunty step and a face full of confidence, he marched into the lawyer's apartment.

Captain Jack, as usual, was at leisure; the man never seemed to have anything else to do but to read newspapers. The Modoc of the law always did his work during the night hours; like the beasts of prey, whom he resembled so much, by day he rested and by night he thrived.

He glanced up carelessly from his newspaper as the Italian entered, nodded and waved his hand toward a chair.

"Help yourself to a seat," he said; "the party hasn't arrived yet, but I expect him every minute."

The Italian had bowed in the dignified and elaborate manner peculiar to him upon entering the room, and after gathering the purport of the law-

yer's speech, had bowed again, and proceeded to occupy the chair.

Captain Jack resumed the perusal of his paper and the Italian sat in silence, watching the gradual progress of the sunbeams advancing over the carpet, and ever and anon turning his eyes impatiently upon the face of the timepiece upon the mantle.

Twenty minutes passed—twenty minutes which seemed to the impatient Italian almost like so many hours. No sound broke the stillness which reigned within the apartment but the ticking of the clock and the rustling of the lawyer's newspaper. The Italian fidgeted nervously in his chair. To his suspicious mind this delay boded no good. At last he could stand the suspense no longer.

"How think you?" he exclaimed, abruptly; "will he come soon?"

"Oh, yes, he ought to have been here an hour ago," Captain Jack responded, just glancing up from his paper and immediately again resuming his reading.

The Italian drummed upon his knee for a few minutes with his long, skinny fingers, his dark face darker than ever; he was more uneasy in mind than even his nervous manner expressed.

Ten minutes more passed; the lawyer, busy with his newspaper, never even so much as cast a glance at his visitor. His visitor could restrain his impatience no longer.

"This gentleman—how do you a-call him? He will not come, I fear."

"Oh, yes, he'll come," the lawyer replied, carelessly; "no fear of that, although he ought to have been here an hour ago. He must have been detained. He is generally full of business and probably something of importance has occurred to delay him." And again Captain Jack turned to the newspaper, but the Italian could keep quiet no longer.

"Hah!" he exclaimed, abruptly; "how you call this gentleman you expect, eh?"

"Taxwill—Mortimer Taxwill; he is one of the executors of the estate."

"And why must I see him, eh?" The adventurer was suspicious.

"Simply because he holds the purse-strings; I couldn't give you a cent in the premises, without he was willing, no matter how important I thought the matter was."

The Italian stared blankly at the wall before him for a few moments; it was plain that he did not like the idea of conferring with this stranger, who, apparently, set little importance upon the appointment.

"Hah! I do not like it!" he cried, abruptly, for the suspicious soul of the adventurer now scented danger. "Why should I wait for this man who no hurries himself to see me, eh?"

"Well, you need not wait if you don't wish to," was the decidedly caustic reminder.

"Does he know the business upon which I come?"

"Oh, yes, I wrote him that you said you had some important evidence in regard to this lost heir."

"And yet he no come?" the adventurer demanded, in wonder.

"Why, the fact of the matter is, he don't care two cents about the heir either one way or the other," the captain explained. "He'd be glad to get the whole matter off his mind; it's only a bother to him."

"I shall not wait!" the Italian cried, jumping to his feet. "Diavolo! what have I to do with this man at all?"

"Haven't I told you that he has the entire control of the estate?"

"Yes, yes, but what is that to me? It is not with ze estate that I would deal; it is with ze heir; it is she that must pay me my hundred thousand dollars; with me she will get ze property; without me she will get nothing; do you not see?" and the Italian's energetic manner was peculiarly fierce.

"Yes, but this gentleman has a most decided interest in the heir," the lawyer explained. "He is very anxious to have her get possession of the property, for then his responsibility will be ended. He is fully convinced that she is Francesca Vendotena, and will leave no means untried to prove it."

"I will not wait longer!" hissed the Italian, who now felt that he was in danger; some subtle instinct within his frame warned him that he was about to lose the game.

"Oh, you had better wait."

"No, no, I will not!"

"Well, write what you will do, then," the lawyer suggested.

"Oh! no!" retorted the adventurer, "me no write! me know better. You write—write what you like! You no catch me in a trap!"

"Aha! you're a cool hand—an old bird, eh?" laughed Captain Jack. "I fancy that a man must get up precious early to catch you napping!"

The Italian grinned; even a rogue is not averse to flattery.

"Well, I'll just make a memorandum; that won't commit you, you know."

"Oh, yes, I know," assented the schemer.

The lawyer produced memorandum-book and pencil, and proceeded to write:

"For the sum of one hundred thousand dollars to you cash in hand paid, you will agree to come forward and swear that this Bouquet Girl is the lost heiress, Francesca Vendotena."

"Yes, that is correct; for one hundred thousand dollars I will swear that she is the heir."

"But if the one hundred thousand dollars is refused?"

"If ze money is refused, then in ze open court will I rise up when you present ze girl and I will say, 'Most noble judge, you are a-deceived; this girl is an impostor!'"

"That is, if we pay you the money, you will swear on our side, and if we don't, you will go against us."

"That is it! You pay me, I am for you; you no pay, I am against you!"

The lawyer had apparently been noting this all down, but in reality not a stroke had he made. When the Italian finished, Captain Jack raised his head and called out:

"Have you got it all down, Mr. Thomas?"

And then the glass door behind the lawyer swung open and revealed that there had been two witnesses to this scene.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION.

DREARY enough is the approach to the little New Jersey settlement known as Branchburg, coming at it from Long Branch.

And the worthy private detective, tramping along through the hot sand in the full glare of the noon-day sun mentally wondered what could induce any one to live in such a region who could possibly live anywhere else.

The road grew narrower and narrower, becoming at last only a cow-track through the scrubby fir trees, and the wild vines, the sole product of the barren soil.

"I must have taken a wrong turning somewhere," the detective muttered, "although they told me to go straight on, and straight on I've come, turning neither to the right nor left, to the best of my knowledge."

But this narrow path through the thick, scrubby timber seemed so unlike a highway that the detective, unused to the sand barrens, "the pines" of south-eastern New Jersey, felt sure that he had made some mistake and got into the wrong road, that is if such a miserable lane could be dignified with the title of road.

Pendalmock had come down from the city that morning and at Long Branch had inquired the way, and being informed that it was only a short distance had determined to walk over, being remarkably fond of pedestrian exercises, but when he encountered the sand he regretted that he had undertaken the task, and now apparently was lost in the wood.

Just as he had made up his mind to go back to the last house which he had passed—for during the last half-hour houses had been few and far between—he heard a dog barking in the wood before him.

"That signifies a human habitation," he muttered and so pushed on briskly.

Just around a turn in the road was a little clearing, and in its center a rude, unpainted house, more hut than cottage—stood.

One "native and to the manor born" would have instantly detected from the outward appearances that the owner of the place was no white "trucker," as the small New Jersey farmer generally is, and to the wandering stranger a small sign-board, rudely painted, stuck up on a tree by the roadside, bearing the inscription:

"WASHING & IRONING DONE HERE,"

no two of the letters alike, would have instantly suggested a descendant of Africa's burning clime.

"By Jove! I believe I've struck the place after all!" Pendalmock exclaimed, as he marched up to the house.

A sneaking "yaller" dog, with open mouth, came rushing out from behind the shanty, seemingly on war intent, but the brandished cane of the detective awed the brute, while the noise attracted the attention of the owner of the shanty and a big, fat colored dame stuck her head out of the door.

"W'at's de matter wid you, boss?" she queried, and then, catching sight of the portly figure of the well-dressed gentleman advancing toward the house, she was quick to define the situation.

"We don't want anyt'ing, boss!" she cried with a shake of the head; "fore de Lord, we ain't got no money; we got all we want; we don't know nuffin' 'bout sewing machines, an' we can't read, an' you can't sell us nuffin', nohow!"

The detective laughed; he saw that the woman was a character.

"You mistake the nature of my business, madam," he replied, bowing as politely as though he were addressing a duchess. "I haven't anything to sell, but I am in search of a certain party. Can you direct me to the house of Mrs. Elizabeth Johnson?"

The old woman looked astonished and for a moment she stared, open-mouthed, at the stranger; then suspicion took the place of astonishment.

"W'at's de matter—w'at does yer want wid her?" she asked.

"I merely wished to procure some information from her, that is all," the detective replied, urbanely; he had a suspicion that the colored dame was the party, for she exactly answered the description that he had received.

"Information—'bout what, boss? 'Fore de Lord! she dunno anyt'ing 'bout anybody."

"Oh, yes, she knows about this party. It's a young girl who used to live with Mr. Limowell, Miss Frank."

"By golly! I dunno whar she's gone!" the negress declared, abruptly.

"Oh, you are Mrs. Johnson, then?"

"How did you know dat, white man?" demanded the dame, rather inclined to be offended.

"Oh, I merely guessed it, that's all. But don't be alarmed about this inquiry. I don't wish to know where the lady now is; I know all about that. I come on behalf of friends of hers, who wish to learn some of the particulars of her early life."

"And you don't mean nuffin' bad to her?" the colored woman demanded, suspiciously.

"Oh, no; quite the contrary."

"An' you ain't got nuffin' to do wid dat ole scamp, Limowell?"

"Nothing at all."

"Well den, boss, I guess I kin tell you—dat is, ef it's gwine to do de leetle gal any good."

"I have reason to believe that your information will be of a great deal of value to her."

"Say, how did yer know dat I knew any thing 'bout her?" the negress importuned, the thought having, apparently, just occurred to her.

"The lady herself believed that you knew some important facts concerning her."

"Bress de chile! She allers believed dat I brought her to dis yere place, but it wasn't no sich t'ing."

"And do you know who did bring her?"

"Oh, yes, honey, 'deed I do!"

"And will you favor me with the information?"

"Yes, sah," replied the woman, promptly. "I've kept de hull t'ing jest as quiet as a mouse, but I ain't a-gwine to, any longer. If it will do de leetle gal good to know all 'bout it, I'se glad on it."

"Go ahead, and with your permission I'll just jot the facts down in my book as you relate them," Pendalmock said, producing his memorandum-book and pencil.

"Say, boss!" cried the old woman, suddenly, "dis hyer t'ing ain't gwine to get me into any trouble, is it?"

"Oh, no, not at all."

"By golly! I'm yer chicken, den."

"Who brought the child here?"

"An Irish woman, Biddy Hoolihan."

"Did she say that it was her child?"

"No, boss; she said dat it belonged to her sister. She kem an' stopped wid me, kase I knew her in de city where we were boff servants in de same house. Arter a time she said she had to go back to New York, an' wanted me for to keep de chile, an' said she'd pay for it, an' she did, for a while, an' den stopped. Well, jest 'bout dat time I had a fuss wid a neighbor; she kem b'ling drunk an' trespassed upon my premises, an' called me names, an' I jest frowned her out an' she went an' swore out a warrant 'gin me to de squire for murderin' her, an' I jest had to trabble, an' I couldn't boddle wid de chile, an' I knew Mrs. Limowell liked children an' hadn't any—she was alive den—so I jest put de chile in a basket an' luff it on dere stoop. Well, boss, I was away some time, an' when I kem back de chile was growin' up right smart. I used fur to wash fur de Limowells, an' so I allers see'd de chile pretty often, an' when de leetle t'ing growed up she allers spicioned dat I knew something 'bout her; but dat's all I do know, an' dat's de dressed trufe!"

"This Bridget Hoolihan—where can I find her?"

"At No. — Baxter street; dar's whar I sent de leetle gal when she run away from de ole debble."

"Oh, yes, I see." But the detective did not see, and he was rather perplexed.

"Yes, sah; boff de gals, when dey cut dar lucky come right to dere old aunty."

"There was another girl, then?"

"Yes, sah, and she was called Frank, too; she run off with a Mister Ronnells. I used to wash for him in de city."

The detective almost started. Here was a surprise with a vengeance.

"And do you know who Mr. Ronnells—James Ronnells really was?"

"Oh, I bet you, honey!" cried the negress, confidently.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BAFFLED BUT NOT BEATEN.

WITH distended eyes the Italian gazed upon the unexpected sight; here was a surprise with a vengeance.

The glass door led into a little inner office; in the apartment were two men, one of them evidently a short-hand writer, as the note-book and pencil betrayed.

"You are quite sure that you have got it all down, Mr. Thomas?" the lawyer repeated.

"Oh, yes," replied the scribe, briskly, advancing into the room as he spoke; "every word, sir."

"This is Mr. Taxwill, one of the executors of the estate," Captain Jack said, with a smile that was "childlike and bland," and he waved his hand toward the other gentleman who had shared the ambush of the stenographer. "You perceive, Mr. Taxwill, how this gentleman stands in the matter. He is quite prepared to swear that black is white and that white is no color at all, provided he is well paid for it."

"Ah, yes, but I don't really think that we shall need his assistance at all," the executor replied, shortly.

The Italian fully realized the extent and completeness of the trap into which he had fallen, and yet so blind of vision was he, so angry in his impotent rage, that he attempted to bully and threaten.

"Aha! it is all very well, signors!" he cried, bristling up. "I would be friends with you, but since you will not have it so, goot! I am your foe! In ze court I will rise and speak some things which may make the most honorable judge open his eyes! Am I a worm to be trodden upon and no turn to bite the foot which crushes me?"

"I don't think that your testimony would be worth much," Taxwill observed, dryly, "considering that we hold in our hands your statement that for a certain sum of money you would be quite willing to swear to anything."

"Diavolo! it is all a lie!" the adventurer fairly shouted. "Behind the closed door you did not hear a-right—you misunderstood me! I will swear to it on my oath! An honest man am I! plenty people will witness that I always a-speak ze truth!"

"Too thin!" remarked Captain Jack, quietly.

"The fact is, old fellow, you might as well own up; you're beaten; you've played a pretty sharp game, but we got the best of it; so haul in your horns and draw off for repairs."

"Oh, yes, my man, that's correct; no use of attempting to frighten us," Taxwill observed, in his brisk, business-like way. "You tried to play a sharp game, but we have got the best of you, so you might as well own up. Any testimony that you might offer in a court of law in regard to this case, after your offer here, this morning, to Mr. Leipper, to testify either way, provided you were well paid for it, would be instantly rejected."

"Oho! I have a-lose ze game, eh?" cried the Italian, moving toward the door, a dark scowl upon his swarthy face and his eyes flashing angrily.

"Most decidedly!" the executor responded.

"Not a doubt of it!" added the lawyer.

And even the short-hand writer could not repress an affirmative nod, so cunningly had the Italian been entrapped.

"Aha!" and the adventurer paused in the open doorway and turned his angry face upon the chuckling trio; "we have a saying in my countree—Italy—'It is not wise to cry aloud until you are out of ze wood.' Another saying, too—'He laughs best who laughs last.' Ze game is not over yet, signors; keep your eyes open for my next play!"

And with the threat, for such it clearly was, the Italian disappeared.

Taxwill looked inquiringly at Leipper. "He threatens?" he said.

"Oh, an empty boast, that's all!" the lawyer replied, carelessly. "What can he do? We've spiked the only gun he had; he will not trouble us any more."

But the lawyer underrated the adventurer; the threat was not merely the vain boasting of a defeated man, for within his brain the Italian had concocted a truly infernal scheme.

No hundred thousand dollars could he get from the Bouquet Girl heir; the wily device of the lawyer had knocked that idea "into a cocked hat;" but he was now free to carry out the compact which he had made with the blonde burlesque queen. He could carry off the heir, and so give the lawyer a Roland for his Oliver.

The heir in his custody—why, he could make his own terms, if he liked; but in his busy brain was a plan worth two of that.

His constant companion, the fat and greasy Italian who called himself Colonel Anselmo del Frascati, was his creature and could be depended upon to do exactly as he said. And after the Bouquet Girl was abducted and safely hidden away from all the world, she could easily be forced into a marriage with the colonel; a renegade Italian priest was at the arch-conspirator's command, an utter scoundrel, forced to fly from his native land on account of numerous crimes, but still a priest, not having yet been unfrocked.

With the heir in his possession—married, too, to his creature, who could be relied upon to do exactly as he was bid—it was quite plain that the executors of the estate would be compelled to come to terms.

"Oh! and shall I not win?" the adventurer muttered, closing his fierce white teeth, as he marched up Broadway; "wait and see!"

For a wonder, the colonel had not accompanied his august friend, this time, and so the Italian proceeded directly to the dingy house on Crosby street, where the two had their quarters.

New York is becoming quite cosmopolitan of late years. It has its German quarter, its French quarter, its Hebrew quarter, its Irish quarter, its Italian quarter, its Chinese quarter, its negro quarter.

With the Italian we have now to do.

The keen-eyed observer who walks up Crosby street, turning into it from Howard, cannot fail to notice the Italian faces that ornament the doorways and windows.

A dozen little saloons are there, in the first three blocks, counting from Howard street, and each and every one thoroughly Italian; well patronized, too, to judge from the groups of swarthy-faced men, Italians of all Italy, usually to be seen, seated at the small tables within, and generally engaged in playing dominoes.

The adventurer, knowing well where the noble colonel was to be found, proceeded to one of the small saloons in the middle of the block bounded by Broome and Spring streets, where the confederate was then deep in a game of dominoes, but when his patron put his head in at the door, the colonel excused himself to his companions, and at once joined the adventurer.

In the face of his swarthy leader he read that all had not gone well.

"They refuse, hey?" he asked.

"They played a deep game; they laugh at me, diavolo! they defy me."

"That is a-bad," the other replied, in his stolid way.

The noble colonel did not trouble himself much with thought; the elder adventurer always did the thinking for both.

"There is nothing left for us, but to carry away ze girl."

"Yes."

"And we must not let the grass grow under our feet."

"No, we must not," the colonel repeated, like an echo.

"It must be done to-night. You have seen about the carriage?"

"Yes; ten dollars it will cost."

"It is dear."

"No less would Taddeo take; he know that it is for no good purpose we want it; he says, 'S'pose

police catch you, then trouble will I have to get my own again."

"Aud what did you say?"

"I laugh and say, 'Police! what have we to do with police?' He say, 'I do not know, but it will be ten dollars, no less.'"

"Ah, well; we can a-pay it."

Before nightfall all needful arrangements had been made, and the conspirators waited but for the mantle of darkness to enable them to carry out their scheme. And when the city clocks struck nine, the plotters, with their coach, were on the ground, ready to abduct the unsuspecting girl.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A FOUL OUTRAGE.

"NINE o'clock, diavolo!" cried the adventurer, angrily, as he listened to the sound of the bells. "Is it so late, then?"

"It is nine," the colonel assented, in his stolid way.

"And ze young man—ze actor, Craige, comes soon after nine; we have no time to lose; we must be quick or else we shall have our labor for our pains. I must insinuate our bird, at once."

The carriage was drawn up to the curbstone just below the old tenement-house, the horses' heads facing toward Hester street.

The colonel was on the box all muffled up and striving to appear as much like a regular driver as possible. The adventurer had descended to the sidewalk.

"I will proceed at once," he said; "turn you ze horses around and drive right up in front of ze door; then jump down and be ready to assist me—ready to place yourself between us and ze corner, so that no one can see me place ze girl in ze coach. Be tranquil! keep you your head and we shall not fail."

Then the Italian marched into the old brick barracks, while the colonel proceeded to carry out his instructions.

Straight up the stairs walked the Italian until he arrived at the door of the apartments occupied by the old Irishwoman with whom the Bouquet Girl had found refuge.

Upon his arm the adventurer carried a heavy gray traveling shawl, and in his hand was a small sponge.

The Italian seemed to possess the catlike faculty of seeing in the dark, for the gloom that reigned supreme within the entry did not appear to disconcert him in the least. When he arrived at the door, he paused, listened for a moment, then took a small bottle from his pocket and poured the contents upon the sponge.

A strong, subtile odor filled the damp and murky atmosphere, at which the Italian shook his head.

"She will smell this—she cannot help it; ah! but will she suspect? Oh, no! it is not probable."

It was a bold game the adventurer was playing, and now at the eleventh hour his heart began to fail him; he felt a doubt of success, so hesitated to knock.

"If I am caught it is ze State Prison," he murmured; "but for what do I play? A half a million of dollars! Is it not worth ze risk?"

With a desperate effort he screwed his courage to the sticking point and knocked at the door.

His design was a simple one—to pretend to the girl that he had some important information to communicate regarding Mr. Craige; swear that the young actor was in danger; entice her out into the entry under the pretense that his information was so important that it must not be overheard by any one; and then, when once the door was closed, the sponge saturated with chloroform and the heavy shawl must perform their offices.

He had little fear that the old Irishwoman in person might interfere with his plan, but if she took the alarm, her cries would arouse the neighborhood, and then "good-by" to all hope of success.

In obedience to his summons the door opened and the Bouquet Girl appeared in person.

"Hush, signora!" cried the Italian, mysteriously; "betray you no sign of surprise! To serve you I come. That noble young man, ze Signor Craige—he is in great danger; you can save him, but no one else in ze wide world must know that in ze matter I have a hand, as it may cost a-me my life! Please step you outside and then to you I will explain; ze lady inside must not hear."

Frank dreamed of no danger—had no thought of evil. "The lady is out at present, so speak freely; no one can overhear you," she said, at once. The name of Craige was the open-sesame to her confidence.

And then, in the heart of the scheming Italian, came a great thrill of joy. Success seemed certain.

"Ah, signora, if you will have ze kindness to permit me to enter," he said, bowing humbly.

"Certainly."

And as the Bouquet Girl turned half around, came the villain's opportunity. He seized the unsuspecting girl in his vise-like grasp. One broad hand he placed upon her mouth, thus stifling any attempt to alarm the house; with the other hand he applied the sponge, saturated with the potent drug, to her nostrils.

He held her against his breast, so that it was almost impossible for her to move.

In vain she strove to resist the effects of the powerful drug, for now, too late, she fully realized that she was the victim of a terrible outrage, but the firm hand pressed over her mouth, and the sponge applied directly to her nostrils cut off the supply of air, and, resist as she might, nature was yielding.

Her senses began to reel; her breath came thick and heavy; all around her grew suddenly dark, and then a great wheel, throwing a vast shower of brill-

iant sparks, seemed to revolve within her brain; the wheel burst and all was darkness.

The drooping head, the light, helpless form, only kept from sinking prone upon the floor by the powerful arms of the adventurer, revealed to him that the girl was wholly in his power.

No time was to be lost, for the old Irishwoman might return at any moment; then, too, it was nearly time for Craige to make his appearance.

Sustaining the unconscious form with one of his strong arms, he folded the shawl carefully around her, and then, raising the girl in his arms, her identity almost completely concealed by the heavy muffler, he prepared to descend.

First he carefully closed the door of the apartment, so that the entryway was again wrapped in utter darkness, and then rapidly turned down the stairs.

"Diavolo!" he muttered; "it will not be well for any one to attempt to stop me now, for I am desperate! I play for a great stake, and I mean to win at any cost!"

Fortune—fickle jade! favors the brave, they say; and also the desperate, too, for in this case the Italian succeeded admirably in his risky attempt. He reached the street door without encountering a soul.

In obedience to orders, the colonel had the coach-door open, and stood ready to assist his leader.

"Up to ze box and drive off!" the leader exclaimed, as he advanced with his burden.

Not a soul was within sight, excepting the people passing by on Grand street, at the corner; and of course, at such a distance, in the darkness, no danger was to be apprehended from them.

The colonel climbed to the driver's seat as fast as his clumsy limbs would permit, but, before he had got the reins fairly in his hand, the principal, with his helpless burden, was safely ensconced within the coach with the door snugly closed.

The colonel started the horses, and the brutes, ugly, clumsy animals, struck into a lumbering trot.

Down the street they went, and turned into Grand, and as the coach rolled past Center Market, the keen-eyed Italian, ever on the watch, detected the tall, manly figure of the young actor, Craige, evidently proceeding to his home.

"By all the devils below!" cried the Italian, drawing a long breath, "but this has been a narrow shave. Five minutes more—three minutes even—and he would have caught me coming out of ze house. And what then?" he cried, sinking back upon the seat and clutching at the air with his nervous fingers. "Would I have a-let him rob me of ze prize? No, no, no! not while this hand can wield a dagger!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE HAUNTED CELLAR.

The carriage did not proceed directly to the lair of the Italians, but took a roundabout course. This was done in order to baffle pursuit if any prying eye had been attracted to the coach.

Through Grand street to Broadway they went, up Broadway to Spring street, through Spring to Crosby, directly past the dingy, two-storied brick house where the abductor occupied apartments, but did not stop. The route had been carefully arranged beforehand, and the object of driving past the house was to see if the coast was clear. The street was dark, almost deserted; fortune indeed seemed to favor the vile.

Straight around the block they drove until they came again in front of the house; then the colonel halted the horses; the man within descended from the coach with the insensible girl in his arms and entered the house.

The two men occupied the basement floor, entrance to which was gained by a passage under the front stoop.

The moment the Italian and his precious burden disappeared under the stoop, the colonel drove off so as not to excite suspicion.

So far the plot had succeeded admirably; the Bouquet Girl was in their power, and the abduction had excited no suspicion.

Everything had been carefully arranged, the door to the basement was unlocked, also the door leading from the entry to the front basement. Within the room a coal-oil lamp, the wick turned down, afforded a dim light.

The two rooms were scantily furnished; a couple of chairs, an old table, two rude bunks arranged upon the floor, some dilapidated dishes, and that was all.

Rather an insecure prison-house for the captive girl, one would be tempted to exclaim, considering that the two front windows, although closely barred by heavy shutters, looked right out upon the street, and that a single cry—a woman's shrill scream—would be certain to alarm the neighborhood.

But the Italian had thought of all this; he was playing for a heavy stake and had arranged to win.

Below the basement was a cellar—a dark, deep, unwholesome pit, never used by the occupants of the house, for the landlord had not only locked and nailed up the door which led to it, but had absolutely taken the stairs away, thus cutting off all access to the underground region.

Good reason had the thrifty Italian who owned the house for thus acting. Within the narrow walls of the little house some ten families were huddled, a family to every room, all Italians, and the poorest of the poor, and so it had been for the last few years—in fact, ever since the Italian had bought the house; and among these families had been many despairing souls, and when the yoke of poverty had pressed too hardly upon their necks, down into the dark recesses of the cellar they had gone and ended their wretched lives with their own hands.

The house began to get an evil name; the superstitious foreigners declared that the unquiet spirits of the men who had so wantonly rushed into the presence of their Maker, haunted the cellar; tenants began to move out and seek other quarters.

In fact, so widely had the evil reputation of the cellar extended that total strangers to the house, but all Italians though, weary of life, stole into the fatal vault, and there, with their despairing hands, solved the problem of existence by ending it.

No use to lock the door; these weary, reckless souls forced the portal open, and so, in a rage, at last the landlord not only nailed the door up as firmly as wood and metal would permit, but took away the stairs bodily.

These stringent measures had the desired effect, and the wretched men who were weary of life, sought elsewhere for suitable places to shuffle off the mortal coil.

Acquainted with all the particulars regarding the vaults below, all access to which had been so carefully cut off, the busy mind of the Italian at once perceived how suitable a place it would be to keep the girl securely. Once she was safe in the cellar, little danger that she could either escape or succeed in giving an alarm.

The first thing was to gain access to the cellar. The two men had formerly occupied a room in the garret, but when the adventurer formed the plan to abduct the girl, he thought of the haunted excavation, so securely closed to all the world; no better place to hide the girl away could possibly be found.

And, as luck would have it, the two basements over the cellar were unoccupied.

He at once set to work promptly; he hired the front basement and the colonel the back one; this was done so as not to excite suspicion, which might have been raised if one man had taken both rooms.

The basements secured, the next thing was to cut a trap-door in the floor and construct a rude ladder, so as to get into the vault. This was not a hard task, and was soon accomplished.

The cellar was damp and unwholesome, and as dark as Egypt, but all this was so much the better for the Italian's purpose. He had an idea in his head which, developed into action, he fondly fancied would prevent the girl from attempting to alarm the neighborhood.

At the back of the subterranean apartment a partition had been run across, and inside of that, at right angles, another partition, thus forming two small rooms, formerly devoted to coal and wood.

High up in the wall in each of these apartments there had been a small window. These apertures for air and light the landlord had boarded up when he had resolved to isolate the vault from all the world, but, as the poor tenants in the house were continually wrenching off the boards for firewood, he had finally bricked up the window-spaces solidly.

One of the little rooms had a good strong door to it, and the wily Italian at once pitched upon this apartment as the prison-pen for the girl.

Removed as it were from the noise of the street, and with only about six inches of the top of the back wall abutting on the yard, and that wall a good solid one, it would be almost impossible for the girl to guess that she was still in the midst of busy, bustling New York.

Upon the floor of the wood-room a rude bed had been spread. A chair and a table comprised the rest of the furniture.

To render the door secure, the Italian had affixed two stout bolts to the outside, one at the top, the other at the bottom. A lantern, too, he had provided, and a hook, attached to a beam in about the center of the cellar, whereon to swing it.

The door which led from the entry-way into the basement he had provided with strong locks and stout bolts; in fine, no measure of precaution had been neglected.

Straight into the front basement the adventurer bore the girl, locked the door securely behind him, placed her upon one of the rude pallets spread upon the floor, and then turned up the other, revealing the line of the trap-door beneath. Thus he had concealed the trap from any prying eyes.

The trap open, the gloomy vault below, illuminated only by the single light of the lantern, was revealed.

Raising the light figure of the girl carefully in his strong arms, the Italian descended the ladder, and then, when he had gained the floor below, he proceeded to deposit his precious burden in the narrow room which his craft had provided for her.

He placed her upon the rude couch, removed the shawl which had been carefully wrapped around her head, and then, fetching the lantern, which he stood upon the table, he proceeded to carefully examine the condition of the unconscious prisoner.

Quiet as the inmate of a tomb, the Bouquet Girl lay. At the first glance the Italian believed that she was dead.

"Diavolo!" he cried, in consternation; "if I have killed her all ze fat is in ze fire! Was ze drug too strong? Oh, no! I have used more than that before; but perhaps she is weaker than I thought. She may have been afflicted with heart-disease; if so, ze drug might produce a fatal effect. If she is dead, then am I a cheated man."

No word of pity for the girl—no regret for the perpetration of the foul outrage; only an oath and a bitter thought that the half a million of "dollars" would escape him, after all his trouble.

But his apprehension was unfounded; the girl was not dead, and slowly, little by little, the color came back to her face.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE ITALIAN'S SCHEMES.

The potent effects of the powerful drug were gradually passing away, and the Italian gloating

over the prostrate form of his victim—as the malignant-eyed Faust might have gloated over the helpless soul, lost to virtue and destined for fires eternal—saw that she would soon wake to consciousness.

"It is goot!" he murmured. "I was a-sure that I did not make ze dose too strong. To kill her now—to see her die at ze very moment of victory—oh, no! that would be too terrible a blow! She must live—live to give me my share of that half million of dollairs."

The pale lips of the girl moved convulsively, and a low sigh escaped from between the pearly teeth.

"She will soon open her eyes, and then—what then, ha?" mused the Italian. "Will she cry out? Will she scream, or will she accept her fate and rest tranquil?"

The questions would be answered in a few minutes, for already the victim was beginning to recover her senses.

Slowly the dark eyes opened and stared in astonishment about. The effect of the subtle drug still lingered, and for a few moments the girl's mind refused to work with its usual clearness; but, little by little the truth flashed upon her; back to her mind came the memory of what had transpired in the old tenement-house. She remembered the message of the Italian, the violent assault, and the application of the potent drug to her nostrils.

The Bouquet Girl was quick-witted, and now that her mind had regained its customary clearness she fully comprehended all that had happened.

She glanced around her; the dim light cast by the lantern fully revealed the narrow compass of her prison-house; and the lank figure of the Italian, gazing down upon her with the hollow, insincere smile so natural to his face, betrayed the pitiless jailer.

"You have recovered from your illness—ah! my dear child! in my heart I cry aloud with gladness!" exclaimed the abductor, perceiving that the girl was in full possession of her senses. "Permit me to assist you to a-rise!"

He advanced to her side; the girl accepted the proffered arm, although she shuddered at the contact.

The Italian noticed the convulsive movement.

"You are a-cold!" he cried. "A hundred thousand pardons that I have no better place to offer you, but I am a-poor; what can I do? We cannot conquer fortune, therefore we must be content."

He assisted the girl to the chair placed by the table upon which the canteen stood.

"Rest you there, my own stricken deer; rest tranquil; do not fear; your farder will protect you against all ze world."

"Why have you brought me here, and where am I?" Frank asked, gazing fearfully at the dark, damp walls that surrounded her.

"If you remember, my child, I came to tell you of Mistar Craige; no sooner did his name my lips escape than it seemed like one great cannon-ball to strike you to ze heart; you turned pale—you tottered—you cried in accents wild, 'I die, I die!' and upon your gentle frame delirium did seize. What was I to do? You was my child! Was I to stand there like a man of marble and see you a-suffer? Oh, no! the feelings of a farder that throb here in my heart forbid it! I determined to bear you away; I had this shelter to offer you, miles away from ze great city where you were in danger. Ah, my child—my dear child, there is one grand plot against you."

"Against me?" The sentence came mechanically from the lips of the girl, for she did not believe a single word that came from the lips of the adventurer, one statement alone excepted. He might speak truth when he said that she was many miles away from the city, for since the interview in the tenement-house hours seemed to have passed. The girl little dreamed that thirty minutes would have covered the entire time.

"Yes, my dear child, against you," the Italian repeated. "But do not fear; with my life will I protect you. This Mistar Craige, he do a-love you much, but he is like all ze Americans; he love money more. That stage woman, ze actress, who did a-come to see you ze other night; she is beautiful, rich; Mistar Craige cannot resist ze temptation; to her he is about to be married. He would deceive you, my child; he would not let you know this; he would swear great oaths that he loves you and you alone, and all ze time he would be ze husband of ze other woman; and she is jealous—as jealous as ze tiger cat; she know that while you live her husband will always love you; she make up her mind that she must kill you; she hire bravoes; they are to watch your steps and some time in ze dark stab you to ze heart. But do not fear, my child—my angel daughter; rest tranquil! your farder will protect you. Here you will be safe; no one can find you, and as soon as you are a-ready, I, your farder, will give you a protector whose very look will make all ze world stand off."

The girl stared at this strange speech; she neither believed nor understood it.

The Italian had only paused to take breath and to note the effect of his speech, and perceiving that the girl, in her bewilderment, did not interpose any objection, he at once fell into the belief that she would be as wax in his hand.

"You are a great heiress, my child," he continued; "ze rogues of lawyers, ze thieves of executors, all would a-rob you; but your farder—that man am I—he stand by and he will not see you robbed. Perhaps you do not believe me, my child, when I say that I am your farder; but it is ze truth. When you a-look into my face does not your heart bound to throw yourself into my arms?"

And as he spoke, the adventurer struck an attitude, and opened his arms, theatrically.

But the girl did not rush into them; her heart did

not respond; no secret spring of love within her breast was touched by the appeal, and so she merely shook her head.

The Italian was disappointed, but he took it all as a matter of course.

"Ah, well, in time ze love will come," he said, with a shrug of the shoulders. "You know that you are a great heiress?"

"Yes, so they say but I do not know it; I do not know anything at all about my birth or parentage."

"But I know it, my child; I know all ze facts. Look well at me, behold! I am ze farder of ze heir—I am Antonio Vendotena."

The girl was surprised at this declaration, for of course she was now well acquainted with the particulars of the life of the wayward son of the old confectioner.

The man fully answered the description; but, like all the rest to whom the Italian had declared himself, she was incredulous.

"Yes, and you, my child, are Francesca Vendotena; you are ze heir to all ze large property; a half a million of dollairs, ha! is that not a fine sum? and part should come to me; it is my right, for am I not my farder's son? This lawyer—how call you a-him?—Leipper—yes! he says he will pay me nothing; but now, my child, I have you; a husband I have provided for you—my noble friend Colonel del Frascati; and when you are married, with me and your husband this cunning lawyer must deal, or else go without ze heir. Then, too, I have another leetle iron in ze fire, and when it gets hot enough, with it I gives this cunning rascal of a lawyer a poke. Listen you to me; I have another child; she is here in New York, she is named Francesca, too; ze will says: to my granddaughter, Francesca Vendotena, it does not say which Francesca. I tell ze second Francesca to call upon ze lawyer and claim her rights. He will be glad to make terms with me when he finds that there is another claimant. Oh, I am Italian born, but I am a match for these American rogues!"

The unfortunate girl had listened in horror to this speech; death would be infinitely preferable to such a fate as he had marked out for her.

"Rest tranquil!" the Italian exclaimed, turning to depart, and taking the lantern in his hand; "we will win ze half a million of dollairs, after all."

"Oh, do not leave me in this dreadful place!" the girl cried, imploringly.

"Do not fear! No one will harm you here. I will hang ze lantern up outside, so that you will have light, and so that no one will get in to trouble you, my child; I will lock ze door securely." And the Italian at once proceeded to do so.

The girl listened to the grating of the key in the lock and the shooting home of the heavy bolts, in silence, but with a despairing heart. She felt that words were useless.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A VALUABLE WITNESS.

DURING the morning which succeeded the one whereon the interview between Captain Jack and the Italian had taken place, with the result of sending the adventurer away completely beaten at all points, Taxwill had taken occasion to drop into the lawyer's office, apparently to ask if any thing more had been heard regarding the baffled Italian, but in reality for a different purpose, although even keen-witted Captain Jack never suspected that the speculating gentleman had any deep purpose in view when he asked a few careless questions in regard to how soon the Vendotena matter would be brought before the courts.

"Immediately," was Leipper's reply; "we might as well have the matter settled now as to wait. I suppose you won't object to taking your 'rake' as soon as possible?"

"Oh, no, the sooner the better; the market has been going against me the last few days and the sooner I can get my hands upon that little sum we named the better."

"It won't take long to settle it, and as for the Italian, we'll hear no more from him."

The executor then withdrew, apparently fully satisfied.

Hardly had the lawyer settled himself down in his chair, and recommenced the perusal of one of the morning newspapers, when a tall, gaunt, elderly man, shabbily dressed, and bearing quite plainly upon his face the marks of dissipation, walked into the room.

The lawyer, imagining the new-comer to be one of the seekers after assistance who pester the business men so much in our great cities, laid aside his paper with a gesture of impatience.

"Leipper and Leipper?" asked the stranger, in a husky voice.

"Yes."

"Head of the firm?"

"Yes."

"You're the man I want to see, then," and the stranger coolly helped himself to a chair, drew it up close to where the lawyer sat, and laid his nervous, shaking finger on the knee of the other.

"No danger of being overheard?"

"No."

"Well, I'm the man you want to see, I guess. You advertised for me in the *Herald* some time ago. I was obliged to keep shady just then, on account of a little trouble I got into—stuck a knife in a man when I had too much apple-jack aboard; they thought he would die, so I had to keep out of sight, for we hang murderers over in Jersey; but now the man is out of danger, and I concluded to risk a visit to you. My name is Lysander Limowell."

The lawyer stared; he was taken completely by surprise, for he had concluded that the scheming old Jerseyman, who had plotted so shrewdly to bring

old Vendotena's half a million into his family, had gone the way of all flesh, long ago.

The old man comprehended the cause of the lawyer's astonishment at once.

"Oh, I'm the man, and I know what you want; it's about the Vendotena affair."

"Yes, but why didn't you come forward before?"

"Don't I tell you that it would have been risking my neck?" the old man responded, gruffly. "And what do I care about the matter, anyway? I can't make anything out of it unless you choose to pay me for my information, that is if I can give you any, and I'm not sure that I can."

"Oh, yes, there's no doubt but what you can assist me a great deal, and of course I will pay liberally for information."

"Go ahead; what do you want to know?"

"In regard to the heir, Francesca Vendotena; she was born in your house?"

"Yes, and brought up by me; no difficulty to prove that."

"Where is she now?"

"That's more than I can tell you. When she was seventeen years old she ran away one night, leaving a note behind saying that she had gone to be married."

"And whom did she marry?"

"Don't know anything about it. I always had an idea, though, that the other girl who lived with me—a beggar's brat that I took in out of charity—knew all about it, but she would never own up to it."

"And what was the name of this girl?"

"Francesca Blakey," and the battered-up old scamp chuckled, as he uttered the name.

"Another Francesca!" said the lawyer, slowly and just a little regretfully. The declarations of the old man had utterly destroyed the fabric which he had so carefully reared upon the base of the Bouquet Girl being the long lost heir; but now, Limowell had appeared—a witness whose evidence would be conclusive.

"Oh, yes; it was all a little game of mine," the aged Lysander remarked. "You see, I entrapped Antonio Vendotena into a marriage with my daughter—you perceive I speak frankly about the matter, for deceit will do no good now. The scamp hadn't the slightest idea of marrying her, but she was a little fool for all her pretty face, and believed every word that the fellow said. I expected the old man would be reconciled, in time, and after the birth of the daughter I felt sure of it. The child was weak and sickly; I was afraid that it was going to die, and then I knew that would end the whole thing. This was when the infant was about a year-and-a-half old, just after the mother's death. And just at this time, when I was sorely afraid that the child would die, this other girl, then an infant six or eight months old, was left in a basket at the door of my house. A bright idea flashed upon me; the new baby—a girl, too—was a strong, robust, little thing, and so near like my daughter's baby in looks that the two could hardly be told apart, except by the size. I took the baby to my wife and told her my idea, which was to keep the fact of the baby being left at the door a secret from every one, and then, if the heiress died, we could substitute the other. It was a capital idea, but as it happened it wasn't needed, for both babies lived and thrived. Still, I didn't know what might happen, so I kept both, named them alike and dressed them alike, so that it would have puzzled anybody to have told which was the true Francesca. Well, to bring matters to a focus, as I told you, the real Francesca ran away and got married, I suppose; I tried to find out something about her, but didn't succeed. In the meantime my wife had died, and I had made up my mind to marry this foundling girl, Francesca the second; Blakey, I called her, and said that her mother was a distant relative of my wife, but the little fool didn't have sense enough to see that it would be a good thing for her, and so she cleared out one dark night, and a day or two after I got into this scrape that I told you about, and had to make myself scarce."

An idea occurred to the lawyer during this recital; the Jerseyman was evidently not over and above scrupulous and he might be bought.

"Well, I've got hold of the heiress."

"Yes."

"Only from her story I gather that she is Francesca No. 1."

"Aha!"

"You're a man of business; how much money would induce you to go upon the witness stand and swear that girl No. 2 is girl No. 1?"

The old man chuckled; this was a device right after his own style.

"Five thousand dollars, and I'll put the evidence so strong that there isn't a criminal lawyer in the world who can shake it on a cross-examination."

"All right; you shall have the money."

"And so that little spit-fire has turned up again, and she's going to win the big stake after all?" the old man soliloquized. "Well, she looks enough like the mother with her dark eyes and light hair."

"Light hair!" cried Leipper in astonishment; "why she hasn't got light hair."

"Yes she has; I guess I ought to know! It's a sort of a golden-red!" the old scamp cried stoutly.

"The girl's hair is jet-black!"

"By the jumping jingo! you're swindled then, for neither one of the girls had dark hair."

And then, to the mind of Leipper came the face of the girl whom, like a spirit, he had twice encountered. She was the true Francesca after all!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE EARRIER BETWEEN.

CRAIGE, upon returning to the tenement-house, was somewhat astonished to find the rooms unlock'd and tenantless, but, concluding that the women-

folks had gone out on some errand, and had neglected to lock the door, he sat down to wait their return.

In about half an hour Mrs. Hoolihan came in, and was considerably amazed upon hearing from Craige that he had found the door unlocked and the Bouquet Girl missing; but of course, though both of the two thought it strange that Frank should go out without leaving word, neither one suspected that anything had happened to her.

But as the hours passed slowly away and the Bouquet Girl came not, apprehension began to take possession of them.

Craige, knowing the scheme of the lawyer regarding her, thought perhaps that she had gone away with him—that some necessary point in the game was to be made and that absence from home was required; but still he couldn't understand why she should go away without leaving word.

No steps to ascertain the truth could be taken that night, of course; and so, until the morning, both the old woman and the young man were doomed to be the prey of anxiety.

As soon as possible in the morning, as the laws of business would permit, Craige sallied down town to the office of Captain Jack and asked the lawyer if he could give him the address of the Bouquet Girl.

Leipper, although somewhat surprised that his acting on the lady's behalf should be known so soon, at once gave the young actor the number of the old house in Baxter street, and Craige, a keen observer, instantly saw that the lawyer was not concerned in the girl's absence, but believed that she was still a resident of the Baxter street house.

What to do the actor knew not; but he hurried home at once, expecting to find that the girl had returned in the meantime; but it was not so, nor had the aged Mrs. Hoolihan, in her inquiries around the neighborhood, been able to gain the least intelligence of the missing girl. No one had either seen or heard of her.

Business called the actor to the theater at twelve, noon; it was salary-day, and he resolved after visiting the theater to call in at the police headquarters in Mulberry street, and ask advice of the sage conservators of the public peace.

He reached the theater about a quarter before twelve, and having occasion to visit his dressing-room, having left his penknife carelessly on the shelf of his dressing place, he entered the back door of the theater, and passing down the passage-way, running parallel with the stage, came face to face with the person he least desired to see—the blonde burlesque queen, Avise Winne.

The passage-way was illy lighted, but even in the semi-gloom, Craige could not help noticing the smile of joy which lit up the handsome face of the actress upon encountering him.

"Ah, is that you, Mr. Craige?" she exclaimed. "Have you received your salary yet? It's ready for you. I've just come from the front of the house; I've been after my 'reward of merit!'"

And as she spoke Avise displayed a huge roll of bills crumpled up in her white and jeweled hand.

The blonde queen felt in unusual good spirits. The hawk-like Italian had hovered around the front of the theater until he had managed to gain speech with Avise, and he had imparted to her the agreeable information that her rival, the hated yet feared Bouquet Girl, was safely removed from her path and would never again trouble her.

Little wonder, then, that reckless Avise Winne's spirits were at fever heat.

"I'm much obliged; I'll go round presently," Craige replied.

He always treated this blonde beauty with the utmost politeness, and so succeeded in keeping her at a distance.

There was a great difference between this man and the common run of stage-players, and the burlesque queen felt it.

"By the way, Mr. Craige," she said, keeping her position right in the center of the narrow passage-way so that it was impossible for the young man to get through until she moved, "how long does your engagement here last?"

"Until the end of the summer season, I suppose; there was no definite time fixed; I am subject to a week's notice at any time, I presume."

"They don't give you the chance here that you ought to have—a man of your talent!" she said, abruptly, her eyes sparkling, and every nerve within her frame quivering with excitement.

Never before had the young actor seen the girl so free of speech, and he wondered at it, although he could not help feeling confused at the open compliment.

Craige little suspected that in celebration of the excellent week's business there had been champagne freely opened in the private office of the theater, and that the young girl had partaken thereof; the wine had made her forget her maidenly reserve, and she remembered only the passion that burned within her veins.

"Oh, I can't complain," Craige replied, strangely embarrassed, and yet not knowing how to withdraw from the awkward situation.

"And the salary, too!" she continued, "a paltry twenty dollars for a man like you, a good dresser, good figure, good face, as good a voice as I ever heard—and I've been on the stage ever since I was a baby—and you can act, too; I know what acting is, although they do say that I can't act, but I draw the money, though; they can't get over that!" And a very queen indeed looked the girl as she tossed her beautiful head in triumph.

"You must be pleased at the business," the young actor remarked, endeavoring to turn the conversation, which was altogether too personal in its nature to be pleasant.

"Twenty dollars a week for you, and that ugly, cast-iron fraud at the Fifth Avenue gets a hundred they say. I tell you what it is, Craige, I'll give you a chance to show what you can do: you shall go with me as 'leading man.' I'll give you a hundred a week and pay all your expenses; they say that I can't act, but I'll show them that whether I can or not, I can draw money in Skakspeare as well as in the burlesques."

Here was a tempting offer indeed, and yet the face of the young actor crimsoned as he listened to it; happily the gloom concealed his confusion. Full well he knew the price that he must pay for the position; the blonde burlesque queen was trying to buy the love that she despised of winning freely.

"Come, you'll accept, won't you?" and Avise's clear voice trembled as she spoke.

"I regret that I cannot," he said, slowly, for a thankless, ungracious task he felt was before him.

"Why not?" and the actress turned red and white as she put the question.

"I am afraid to try such a position; I am not equal to it; I should fail."

"Oh, I'll risk that!"

"But I dare not."

For a few minutes there was silence; there were tears in Avise's brilliant eyes, and as for Craige, he wished that he was a hundred miles away.

"Be my business-manager, then; go with me and attend to the money in front of the house; you are a gentleman—you are honest; you will see that I am not robbed."

"I cannot," Craige replied, finding that he must speak. "I am going to leave the stage and the stage life altogether as soon as I can."

"Oh, you despise us," the actress observed, with bitter accent. "I heard that you did, but I did not believe it!"

"I do not despise any honest laborer in any vocation," the young man replied, gently, "but the stage life is not the life for me."

"And when you marry you will be too proud to marry an actress, eh?" exclaimed Avise, her pride coming to her aid.

"No, not too proud; but I will frankly own that there are few women on the stage, that I have met with, whom I would like to marry. The stage is not the school to train a wife properly. After the glare and glitter of the footlights, and the intoxication of popular applause, the quiet home life will seem dull and drear."

"I am much obliged for the information!" and Avise swept past him with the air of a tragedy queen.

That night Craige received his discharge.

Oh, these women! so mean sometimes in their revenge!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UNEXPECTED DISCLOSURE.

THE evening's performance had ended and the green curtain had fallen on the closing tableau of the burlesque. Avise not only sick at heart, but weary with the exertions of the night, for it is no joke to dance through two mortal hours of a burlesque with the thermometer at ninety in the street and nearly a hundred in the gas-lit theater, no matter how easy the task might appear to the delighted auditor in front, who lustily applauds the weary artists and insists on an *encore* of the song or dance, whichever it may be, that happens to tickle his fancy.

The blonde queen, now radiant in the paint, the powder, and the various devices common to the Thespian life, which heightened by the glamour of the mystic footlights, make a plain girl look pretty, and transform a handsome, showy one into a bewitching creature only a little less than an angel, proceeded with languid steps directly to her dressing-room, the handsomest one in the establishment, a very little parlor in its fittings.

Beautiful as an angel looked the girl in her gaudy stage trappings, but her face was sad and she hung her head dejectedly.

At the door of the dressing-room she met the jovial Tim, the indefatigable business agent.

"Well, what did he say when you handed him your notice?" Avise asked, her proud lips curling scornfully.

With all that refinement of cruelty so natural to the breasts of some women when their anger is excited, the actress had penned the note, giving the young man warning that his services would not be required after that week, with her own hand, and had dispatched it by Tim, her own confidential man of business.

"Not a word."

"But did he read the letter?"

"Oh, yes, he opened it at once."

"And did not evince any surprise?"

"Not a mite."

"That's strange!" and Avise's beautiful brows knitted.

"I guess he expected it, for he just glanced at it, you know, and put it in his pocket as cool as a cucumber."

The blonde queen felt annoyed that her petty malice had not succeeded in provoking the young man; accustomed to the common way of taking such things, she expected an outburst of rage and a violent word or two directed against herself, but the calm common sense of Craige had baffled her. In truth, the young man was fully prepared for the blow; after what had occurred that day he felt that it would be impossible for him to remain in the theater where the dashing burlesque actress exerted such power.

"By the way, that queer old cove—that Italian, is at the back door, and he says that he would like to see you to-night on some very particular business," Tim continued.

"Tell him to go to the hotel and wait for me; I'll be there in about half an hour."

Avise felt sure that the Italian came to tell her something more about the Bouquet Girl, and though she now despaired of winning Craige's love, even in the absence of her rival, yet she took a malicious pleasure in the thought that if he was not for her, neither was he for that "imp of the gutter," as she commonly termed her rival.

The actress withdrew into her dressing-room and Tim departed with his message.

Avise had calculated closely; in just half an hour she alighted from her carriage at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, and beckoned the seedy Italian, who was skirmishing about the door of the lady's entrance, to follow her.

In her parlor, divested of her wrappers and hat by the careful hands of her maid—all these luxuries of wealth the actress possessed—Avise motioned to the Italian to proceed, first dismissing the maid.

The hawk-faced foreigner stood by the marble center-table, his hat in his hand, watching the beautiful girl closely with his shrewd, evil eyes, as though mentally calculating what impressions the disclosure he was about to make would have upon her.

"You will pardon me my intrusion," he began.

"Oh, yes," the actress cried, impatiently, "provided that you have something to say worth the listening to. I don't suppose that you are fool enough to come and bother me at such an hour as this without some good reason."

"In five minutes your own great wits shall decide that," he replied, bowing humbly. "A short story I must relate to you first, and I do a-pray that you will me your entire attention give."

The preface somewhat astonished the actress, but with a nod she signified that she was ready to listen.

Couched in the soft embrace of a great easy-chair, cosily fanning herself with a jeweled fan, a toy worth the whole year's work of a poor man, the actress seemed indeed to be the spoiled darling of fortune.

"Twenty years ago in this great city lived an Italian confectioner named Lorenzo Vendotena; he was a man of property; one son only did he possess; that son, Antonio by name, without his father's knowledge and against his father's wishes, married a poor girl in ze country, her name, Decetra Limowell. To that marriage one child was born, a girl—that girl named Francesca, after Antonio's mother."

The motion of the fan stopped abruptly and Avise, sitting bolt upright in the chair, stared at the speaker with a strange light in her eyes.

"Francesca," she murmured.

"Aha, ze name is not strange to you, eh? I thought that it would not be! Rest tranquil while I proceed. Ze old man disinherited ze son, shut ze door in ze face of ze wife and refused to look at ze child, so mad was he. Ze husband and wife quarrel; he say, 'Madam, you have a-married me for my father's money; with your trick you have a-separated us! no more of you will I have! I will a-fly from you to ze end of ze earth!' and fly he did."

The Italian paused to take breath, and Avise sunk back again in her listless attitude, evidently taking but little interest in the story.

"I continue; one year ago, about, ze old man die; his money—large fortune, one-half million of dollars! he leave by will to his grand-child, Francesca, ze daughter of his son Antonio."

Again, at the name of the girl, the actress had pricked up her ears.

"You will observe, one-half million dollars to Francesca, daughter of Antonio Vendotena, so much it says and no more. A lawyer here, he seek for ze heir; he cannot find ze right one, so he take a false girl and say: 'Lo, behold, gentlemen! this is Francesca Vendotena!' Then in ze court I will arise; I say, 'No, no! very loud, 'it is all a falsehood! Behold in me Antonio Vendotena, the fader of ze heir; that girl is not my child; she is here by my side; this lady, Avise Winne, this is Francesca Vendotena—this is ze heir! Diavolo! we win ze half million!"

The girl half rose in her chair in excitement.

"My name is Francesca, but it cannot be possible that I am your child or the heir of this estate!"

"Oh, yes, it is possible!" he said, with a crafty smile. "When I quarrel with my wife I go to London. While I am there my American wife die. I meet your mother; she is an actress, Jane Hodgkinson, but like you she play under a false name; Jenne Winne she call herself. I was young, foolish; I call myself an Italian count; I run after your mother, and at last she marry me. From that union came you, my child. If you do not believe me, see, here is your mother's marriage certificate which I stole from her trunk when I run away from her after you were born; that was when my money give out and I meet with a rich ballet-dancer who promise me plenty money if I go with her to Italy."

Never was there a more thorough-paced scamp than this fellow, a more unblushing one!

The worn and faded papers seemed proof indeed that he spoke the truth, and Avise, looking back to her childhood's days, remembered her mother's bitter words of the "noble" husband who so wantonly deserted her.

"But, if all this be true—if I am the heir to this great fortune, how can I get it?" Avise asked, her brain in a whirl.

"Go to ze lawyer to-morrow; tell your story and you will win!"

The Italian spoke with the air of a conqueror, for he felt he was master of the game!

CHAPTER XXXV.

FRANCESCA NO. III.

DURING the morning following the night whereon the interview described in our last chapter had taken

place, the snug office of Leipper and Leipper was honored by a visit from the blonde burlesque queen.

The lady was well known by sight to Captain Jack, for the lawyer was a great patron of the amusements of the day, and, although taken completely by surprise by the visit, he hastened to receive her with due honor.

The dashing actress accommodated with a chair, the lawyer prepared himself to listen while she unfolded the object of her visit.

"I have called upon you in reference to the Vendotena estate," she said.

The lawyer looked astonished.

"If I am rightly informed the heir to that estate, Francesca Vendotena, is missing, and you are anxious to find her," she continued.

"Your information is not exactly correct; I have found her."

"You mean that you have found a girl who pretends to be the heir."

"Pretends?" Cool Captain Jack was much amazed.

"Oh, yes, I understand all about it," the actress said, decidedly. "Of course a fortune of half a million of dollars is worth striving for. This girl pretends to be the heir in order to seize the fortune which does not belong to her."

"This is a pretty strong statement, miss," Leipper observed, slowly.

In sooth, the lawyer was puzzled; the aged New Jersey scamp had but just departed, and his confident declaration that Francesca No. 2 had light hair had puzzled the lawyer not a little. Leipper, after this disclosure, had carefully described the Bouquet Girl to him, and the aged rogue had declared that in all other respects, the color of the hair alone excepted, the description answered exactly, and then the lawyer had related how he had twice encountered a young woman with light hair, who was the exact image of the old picture which he possessed of Decetra Limowell, the mother of the missing heir.

The old fellow listened in silence until Leipper ended; he was evidently puzzled, and then he asked the lawyer who he thought the girl was.

"The right girl—the heir, the child of Decetra!" Leipper had answered; the Jerseyman had shook his head and informed the bewildered lawyer, that, from the description, he should suppose it was the true Francesca No. 2.

Leipper had reflected for a moment and admitted that she did look a great deal like the Bouquet Girl, although of course the black hair of the latter gave a different expression to the face.

In order to solve this mystery the lawyer made an appointment with the Jerseyman, for that afternoon, promising to have the Bouquet Girl there. Limowell had departed and Leipper, annoyed and mystified, was still puzzling his brains over the matter when the actress made her appearance.

"A strong statement!" repeated Avise, smiling; "perhaps it is, but it is the truth."

"You have proof of this?"

"The very best proof in the world! I can produce the true heir, Francesca Vendotena."

"When?"

"Now; I am the person."

A look of profound amazement appeared upon the face of the lawyer, and for a moment he gazed at the lady in silence.

And now that he was face to face with Avise, the glare of the garish stage-lights absent, and had time to closely scan the beautiful features of the stage queen, to his astonishment he saw that there was a strong resemblance between the face before him and the features of the old confectioner, Lorenzo Vendotena.

"Really you astonish me, Miss Winne. I have had the pleasure of witnessing your performances at Wallack's, so that you are not altogether a stranger to me," the lawyer explained.

"I was not aware of the facts until last night, or I should have called upon you before," Avise explained.

"Yes, but I understood—that is, I had the impression that you were English by birth."

"So I am."

"How then can you be the heir to this estate? Francesca Vendotena was born in America."

"Excuse me if I ask you to repeat to me the exact words of the will of my grandfather relating to the heir?" the actress said, quietly. "Does not the will say: 'to my granddaughter Francesca, the child of my son Antonio'?"

"Yes, I believe that is the way it reads."

"It does not say anything about the child being born in America or England, does it?"

"No."

"Well, then, my name is Francesca Vendotena. I am the child of Antonio Vendotena and Jane Hodkinson; my father married my mother in London. Here is the marriage-certificate."

The lawyer took the document and glanced over it carelessly.

"How did these facts come to your knowledge?"

"My father informed me."

"Oh!" The lawyer was now in possession of the mystery.

"My father who still lives and is now in New York."

"When were you born?" asked Leipper, abruptly.

"March 20th, 1859."

"And this marriage-certificate is dated June 10th, 1859."

Avise stared in amazement.

"That is, my dear Miss Winne, you were born two months before your father and mother were married."

The actress turned scarlet.

"This is some infamous falsehood!" she exclaimed; "my mother was a good woman."

"No doubt of it at all, Miss Winne," replied the lawyer, respectfully, "but she was undoubtedly the dupe of as big a rascal as walks the earth to-day. The date of this marriage-certificate has been tampered with, and the alteration has been so unskillfully done that it is plainly apparent even to the naked eye. These sharp rogues generally over-reach themselves in little matters. The original date of the certificate was undoubtedly 1858; but as the first wife of this precious scamp happened to be alive then, and there had been no dissolution of the marriage bond, he knew that this second fraudulent marriage was only a mere sham; so he changed the date of the certificate in order that the ceremony would appear to have been performed *after* the death of his first wife, thus making it legal. But, my dear Miss Winne, even if the ceremony was a legal marriage, and you the legal issue, and your name Francesca Vendotena, there would be very little chance for you to inherit this estate, even if the other Francesca could not be found. I drew out the will, and the old gentleman plainly said that the heir he had chosen was Francesca, the daughter of Decetra, his son's wife. He had no knowledge that his son had married again. In fact, at that time he had no certain knowledge that his son was alive, for he had not heard from him for a long time. True, the will only says Francesca, but my evidence, and the evidence of the two executors to the will, would clearly prove that he meant the child of Decetra, the only Francesca known to him to exist. And, as to this person who pretends to be Antonio Vendotena, Miss Winne, I believe him to be an impostor; some acquaintance of the true Antonio, who, I think, is dead; this fellow possessed himself of some of the facts in this case and is trying very hard to make some money out of the affair."

Avise, mortified and confused, withdrew, for she was convinced that the Italian had tricked her.

And Captain Jack, in high glee at having parried so deftly the Italian's blow, hurried up-town to the home of the Bouquet Girl.

Great was his consternation when he found that she was missing.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

VENGEANCE HAS A LONG ARM.

SLOWLY passed the long hours away, and the hapless girl immured in the gloomy vault was the prey of the most terrible apprehensions.

One visit only had the Italian made; then he had brought food and drink, spoken smoothly, bidding the girl to be of good cheer, talked vaguely of the bitter enemies who were so eager to harm her, and in his vainglorious way had declared that, while he lived no one should touch a hair of her head.

In vain she entreated him to let her go free; he shook his head, told her she did not know what she asked—not for worlds would he expose her to the danger which threatened her, then complimented his friend the colonel; told what a noble man he was; dilated upon his many good qualities; assumed a confidential tone and informed her that the noble son of the house of Frascati had long admired her in secret, and that nothing in this world would give him more pleasure than to see her united to his worthy friend.

The girl had barely made reply to this; her mind was dazed by the strangeness of her position, and she paid but little heed to the words of the Italian.

Like the caged bird, she thought only of escaping from her terrible plight.

The Italian withdrew after a few minutes' conversation, when, for quite a long time, the unfortunate prisoner was left to her own sad thoughts.

Not the least trust did she put in the words of the adventurer; she believed him to be a bold, bad man, who would not stop at any evil.

One thought alone kept the girl from utterly despairing; she was convinced that he would leave no stone unturned to rescue her from the power of this dark adventurer and impostor.

At last the Italian came again, accompanied this time by three others. With careful steps the four descended the ladder into the cellar, closing the trap-door after them. First the wily adventurer; following him the fat and greasy colonel, and then two strangers, muffled up as if they wished to disguise their persons, brought up the rear.

The Italian opened the door of the girl's prison-pen and the heart of Frank sunk within her as she looked upon the dark figure; she fully realized that a crisis in her life was at hand.

The Italian took the lantern from its hook and placed it upon the table.

"This is my dear child," he said, pathetically, "my long-lost daughter, my Francesca! who from me a long time has been separated. But what of that? We are together at last, and we are happy! And what joy it is to my heart, too, when I find that she and my beloved, my noble friend, ze Colonel Frascati—love one another with all ze tenderness of their young hearts. Ze colonel, he say to me, 'Noble friend, I your fair child love! give her to me that in my heart she may bloom and flourish like ze green bay tree!' I say, 'With all my soul! there is no man on ze top of this earth to whom I would rather give my child!' and so ze matter is settled. Francesca, my child, this is ze priest, good Farder Michael; he will perform ze ceremony that will give you to my noble friend forever: and this gentleman is kindly come to witness that ze affair is all correct and legal according to ze law. You are one great heiress, my child, and we must not have any doubt in regard to your marriage. Farder," and he turned to the taller of the two strangers, "be you a-pleased to commence when you are ready; colonel, my son, stand forward."

The fat Italian advanced with a smirk upon his fat face.

The girl had listened to all this like one under the influence of some horrible spell; a hapless bird fascinated by a creeping serpent might have stared as she stared with strained eyes upon the actors in this strange scene.

But when the fat and ruffianly Italian advanced toward her, evidently intending to take her hand, with a sudden thrill she recovered the use of her voice.

"What do you intend to do with me?" she demanded.

The eyes of the Italian flashed; he saw that the girl intended to resist.

"Unite you in marriage to this noble gentleman, my child," he answered, smoothly.

"No, no! I will not consent. He is a stranger to me; I do not know anything about him; the law will never sanction such a terrible outrage! Oh, gentlemen! I appeal to you!" and she extended her hands wildly toward the strangers.

"Bah, bah! hush you up your tongue!" cried the Italian, sternly. "You are my child; I know what is best for you. These gentlemen understand all about it. It is my right to marry you to whoever I please; it does not matter whether you like it or not. Take her hand, colonel, and we will proceed with ze ceremony."

But at this critical moment within the heart of the weak girl was infused the courage of despair.

"I will not consent!" she cried, wildly. "I do not believe that you are my father! and, even if you were, there is no law, human or divine, that gives you the right to force me into a marriage from which my soul recoils. I will not submit; and you, sir, if you are a priest, you surely will not take part in this outrage! I am a prisoner here, forcibly abducted by this man, and the law will yet punish him for the crime!"

"Bah, bah!" cried the adventurer in contempt, "you talk too much with your mouth. I am your farder and have ze right to do with you as I like. Both these gentlemen understand all about that. You are a foolish little child! you do not know what is good for you, but I, your farder, do. It does not matter whether you consent, or not; we can get along without that; you had best submit quietly, else I shall be obliged to tie up your pretty hands and mouth. You need not say one single word; we can marry you and you can keep your mouth shut!"

"Oh, gentlemen, for heaven's sake save me from this dreadful man!" pleaded the girl in agony.

But, what were idle words and tears weighed against the heavy stake for which the unscrupulous Italian played?

"Come, come! we do lose much time!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "Colonel, my noble friend, step you a-forward and take ze lady's hand, and, good farder, out with your book and proceed with the ceremony. It is all right! I give my consent, and that is all that is needed."

A second step forward the Italian colonel took. The girl recoiled in horror; the dark-bearded priest produced his book, the adventurer, his eyes sparkling joyfully in anticipation, rubbed his hands gleefully together. At last he saw success about to crown his efforts.

And then, at this very moment of victory, there came a sudden change in the current of affairs.

A powerful blow, deftly given, knocked the lantern off the table, breaking the glass into fifty pieces, instantly extinguishing the light; then came a sudden yell that told only too well of mortal agony, followed by the sound of a violent struggle, and all this in the black Egyptian-like darkness.

The girl had shrunk back against the wall at the commencement of this fearful scene, horror-stricken.

Only a few seconds did the struggle last; and then it was followed by the sound of hurried footsteps retreating from the little room.

The girl, every sense on the alert, heard the footsteps upon the rude ladder and saw the gleam of light which came from the room above as the trap-door opened; she saw the light obscured for a moment as the men clambered into the room above; then all was still.

Frank felt that she was alone—alone with the dead; some terrible tragedy had transpired in the dark, but the way of escape was open to her and she at once hastened to avail herself of it.

No hand was outstretched to detain her as she hurried from her prison-cell, ascended the ladder, passed through the room above into the entry—the door was unlocked—and out into the street. The sign upon the lamp post at the corner told her where she was, and within fifteen minutes she was again safe at home.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TRUE HEIR.

In busy conversation with the old lady and Mr. Craige, Frank found the head of the private inquiry office, Pendalock, and after the Bouquet Girl had told the strange story of her abduction and wonderful escape, Pendalock proceeded to business. He had shrewdly guessed that the lady who had employed him to gain information about the birth and early history of the baby girl left to the care of the Jersey lawyer, Lysander Limowell, was the party in question herself, and therefore was not surprised at encountering her in the old tenement-house.

This was his second visit to Mrs. O'Hoolihan. From that lady, on his first visit, he had extorted but little information, simply because the woman knew but very little about the matter, and she was completely astonished when she found that the Bouquet Girl was the baby whom she had left to the

care of the old colored woman in New Jersey, years before. When Frank had fled from Limowell's persecutions, she had two objects in view, the first, to escape from the attentions of the drunken old scamp; second, to find her childhood's companion Francesca, the daughter of Decetra, who had fled from home to be married to James Ronnells, and who would, she felt sure, in time have cause to regret her secret union.

And now to recall the mystery of the dark hair and light which had perplexed both the lawyers and Limowell.

Frank, flying in haste from the old scamp's persecution, felt sure that he would leave no stone unturned to find her, as he had often threatened, and so, when she reached the city she had had her own light locks cut short and purchased a black wig, which, as she was careful to always cover with a handkerchief when engaged in her avocation as a flower-girl, defied detection.

Two separate lives the girl led; in the daytime with her own hair, carrying a basket of laces, she diligently traversed the streets of the great city, going from house to house, intent upon finding the lost girl. At night, as the flower-girl, disguised by the wig, she haunted the ferries. And so she earned her bread and at the same time kept up her search; but as in this world we often stumble by chance upon the thing we search for in vain, so Frank, learning that there was a sick girl living upon the upper floor of the house, in need of assistance, and going thither to tender it, discovered that the sufferer was the companion of her childhood.

And thus she had happened to twice encounter the lawyer, Captain Jack; the first time in the entry of the old house, the second time when she had gone to the office of Benard and Britman with the intention of discovering who James Ronnells was, little thinking that she should walk into Leipper's presence.

We have stated that Mrs. O'Hoolihan was astonished, and so she was when she discovered that Frank was the child whom she had given to the old colored woman, long ago. The aged dame had believed that Mrs. O'Hoolihan would recognize her at once, but the rather dull-witted Irishwoman had never thought of it.

But all was clear now; Francesca, the heir, was dead, and James Ronnells, the man who had betrayed her, was Jack Leipper, the lawyer.

Time in its flight had avenged the wrong; had the villain cherished the flower he had won, the old confectioner's fortune would have come to him beyond a doubt, through his wife.

But Frank, with a wonderful likeness to the Venetian family—who was she?

Mrs. O'Hoolihan could not tell; her husband had brought home the baby one night and had given it into her charge, telling her that the infant would bring them in a deal of money some day, and had instantly packed them both off to the country as if he feared pursuit. Mrs. O'Hoolihan's husband was not as honest a man as he might have been.

From the country Mrs. O'Hoolihan was hurriedly summoned back to New York to attend to her husband, he having received a severe wound in a night brawl. From the effects of the wound he died, and his last words were—"See Pat Casey about that baby; it will be money in your pocket!"

But Mr. Patrick Casey, a great chum of O'Hoolihan's, and a gentleman well known to the police, was not to be seen just then, as he had been obliged to flee to parts unknown on account of a certain affray resulting in the loss of life, in which he had played a prominent part; and so, Mr. Casey never happening to come across Mrs. O'Hoolihan's track, the whole affair had slipped from her mind.

In possession of these facts, added to the knowledge that Mr. Casey was at present sojourning at Sing Sing under a life sentence for murder, the way was clear to the detective.

He visited Sing Sing and interviewed Casey.

"Yes," that worthy did remember something about the affair. "My wife lived in the same house with the mother of the child; she was sick—the mother I mean—and my wife nursed her a bit, and she told my wife that she must take care of the baby if she—the baby's mother, you know—should happen to die suddenly, for that her father-in-law would give a good deal of money for it, some time. Well, she did die, and my woman snatched the kid, thinking as how we'd make a strike outen it, but, bless you! we never heerd nothing about it."

"And the name of the mother?" Pendalock asked.

"A furren name, Ven—something."

"Vendotena?"

"Co-reck, governor; Deceiver Vendotena, or something like that."

All was plain now; a second child had been born to the deserted mother, and by a strange chapter of accidents fate had carried it to the house of its relative to be reared.

And so, in the death of the direct heir, the Bouquet Girl was likely to come in for the property, after all.

But "riches have wings," they say, and in this case of the half a million it proved to be the truth, for the morning newspapers the next day in startling "head-lines" told of the failure and flight of the daring speculator, Mortimer Taxwill, esquire; and in his fall the unscrupulous seeker after wealth had dragged down many innocent victims.

Old Vendotena's fortune had been nearly all invested in government bonds, and Taxwill, skillful and shrewd, and fully trusted by his brother-executor, had contrived to lose about half of the estate in his gigantic speculations, and finding that there was a likelihood of the heir appearing, and his executorship being called into question, coolly helped himself

to the rest and fled beyond the seas, never to return.

Like the monkey in the fable, in order to settle the dispute he had eaten the oyster himself and left the shells for the contending parties.

Little, though, did either the Bouquet Girl or her lover, Craige, care; they had never set their minds upon the vast sum, and so they bore their disappointment cheerfully.

Abandoning the stage life, the young man sought again the quiet country home, the little farm, where his mother resided, and which he had forsaken to win the laurel crown of fame.

The Bouquet Girl he carried with him as his happy wife. He had learned the lesson that contentment is better than riches, and that the certain gains, though small, of the tiller of the soil, are often to be preferred to the golden prospects of a professional life.

When the people of the Italian house, attracted by the open doors, penetrated to the cellar, they found the noble colonel bound hand and foot, and the adventurer, Antonio Vendotena, stone dead, with a dagger through his heart.

The brothers of the Carbonari, with their long arm of vengeance, had reached clear across the ocean and stricken the traitor who had betrayed the cause of liberty.

Avis Winne still bewitches the public eyes and charms the dollars from the public pockets, but great as are her gains, she would give them all for one little hour of the peaceful joy which dwells forever in the heart of the Bouquet Girl.

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